

Northern Canadian  
Aboriginal Teachers' Perceptions of  
Classroom Learning Environments

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By

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## ABSTRACT

This study is based on the premise that Aboriginal teachers possess valuable knowledge and insights with regard to the education of Aboriginal children. The assumption was that, if asked, these teachers would willingly share their experiences, knowledge, and perceptions in an effort to contribute to the academic research which seeks to understand the processes of cross-cultural negotiation and ameliorate the cultural conflict existing in cross-cultural classrooms.

The purpose of the study was to determine the perceptions of Northern Canadian Aboriginal teachers regarding effective classroom learning environments. This study examines the early socialization experiences of seven Northern Canadian Aboriginal teachers. The research attempts to link traditional cultural values and primary socialization experiences to the teachers' perceptions, beliefs, and practices regarding the development of their classroom learning environments. In effect, to address the "why" questions with regard to the teachers' development of the learning environment within their classrooms.

When the research data were analyzed, the relationship between the teachers' recounted socialization experiences, traditional cultural values, and their development of classroom learning environments was evident. The conclusion can be made that these

Aboriginal teachers integrate traditional cultural values learned through their primary socialization experiences with their development of classroom learning environments which reflect their culture, and compliment the patterns of interaction in their communities, to make learning in the classroom as compatible as possible with the learning that takes place outside it.

Further, this study provides information, through the Aboriginal participants' observations and suggestions, for non-Native teachers who are concerned with creating classroom environments that reflect Aboriginal students' culture and respect the knowledge which they bring with them to the classroom setting.

The identification of a research method which facilitated small group interaction and participation in the research process was perceived as a critical consideration with regard to conducting this study. Focus groups were identified as a suitable methodology and used as the means of data collection for this qualitative research study. An important result was that collective exploration of individual experiences served to expand the participants' knowledge and understanding of their own teaching practice. Conclusions regarding the appropriateness of the focus group methodology when conducting research with Aboriginal participants are included in the findings of the study.



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## DEDICATION

It is with gratitude and respect that I dedicate this thesis  
to the Northern Aboriginal women,  
colleagues, teachers and friends,  
who shared their lives, traditions, insights and knowledge

and to my sons

Nathan C. J. Watson

and

Joshua Raymond Watson

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

#### **Introduction**

The desire to conduct this study emerges from my sixteen years of experience as an Aboriginal teacher and administrator working within the formal education system. During these years, I have come to understand the basic contradiction between Aboriginal beliefs about education and the Euro-Canadian concepts on which the present educational system is based. The Aboriginal concept that education is “learning about life through participation and relationship in community” (Cajete, 1994, p. 26) is in direct contrast with the dominant orientation of Euro-Canadian education “that continues to emphasize objective content and experience detached from primary sources of community” (1994, p. 26).

Today, in spite of efforts by colleges and universities across Canada to train Aboriginal teachers, many Aboriginal children in Canadian classrooms are taught by non-Native teachers. Taylor (1995) contends that “Ninety percent of Native children in this country will, at one time or another, be taught by a non-Native teacher, and many of these children will receive most of their education from non-Native teachers” ( p. 224). The real pressure to provide answers to teachers experiencing difficulty working with

Aboriginal students came when I assumed the role of school principal. I discovered that, while I could demonstrate effective ways of working with Aboriginal students, I was unable to answer non-Native teachers' questions about why a particular approach was successful, particularly when some of my suggestions were in direct conflict with the pedagogy or classroom management strategies that had been recommended during their formal training. It did not take these non-Native teachers long to discover that the value systems, life styles, and ways of teaching and learning which they brought to their classrooms were not often shared or even appreciated by the students they were trying to serve. This situation resulted in an environment characterized by cross-cultural conflict which frequently led to feelings of frustration, anger, inadequacy, and anxiety for teachers and students alike (Barnhardt, 1982, p. 116).

The chasm between Aboriginal and the Euro-Canadian concepts of education, combined with conflicting value systems, life styles and ways of teaching and learning has created a contentious classroom situation. Thus, non-Native teachers, as well as Native teachers and students, are caught in the contradictory cross-cultural environment which characterizes school classrooms.

Further, it has been my experience that there is clearly a need for Native approaches to educational instruction and "classroom methods and structures" (Hampton, 1995, p. 10) if we are to be successful in creating learning environments which support Aboriginal students. Non-Native teachers do experience special problems in cross-cultural situations (Ward, 1992). They experience "culture shock" (Taylor, 1995), feel "uncertain, frustrated and inadequate" (Orieux, 1988), encounter "culturally

distinctive communicative behavior” (Philips, 1983) which they cannot readily internalize and are confronted by unfamiliar “interaction and participation patterns” (Scollon & Scollon, 1981). Finally, due to the high turn over of non-Native teachers on reserves (Taylor, 1995), lack of trained Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginal peoples’ migration to the larger centers, and Aboriginal teacher “burn out” (Grant, 1995, p. 209), most Aboriginal students will experience their formal education within the territorial education system in classrooms taught by Non-native teachers. To recapitulate, “when culturally different groups meet in a common arena, such as school, each group acts according to its own cultural norms which may result in opposition from the other group” (Holyan, 1993, p. 41). Thus, within the parameters of cultural differences and conflict, neither group can profit.

It is my belief that Aboriginal teachers can play a vital role in the development of classroom learning environments that “integrate the learning occurring through modern education with the cultural bases of knowledge and value orientations” (Cajete, 1994, p. 18) essential to the success of Aboriginal students. Finally, while acknowledging that “no amount of sensitizing non-Native teachers will equal one who has the experience of being a Native person” (Farrell, 1993, p. 42), this study does offer new insights to the discourse concerning Aboriginal education that will assist both assist both Native and non-Native teachers and their students in developing classrooms which epitomize positive learning environments.

## The Problem

As noted by Douglas (1994) the institution of Euro-Canadian schooling has been “superimposed on Canada’s Indigenous peoples with little, if any, recognition of their cultural contexts” (p. 155). Yet, academic research has shown that for Aboriginal students to succeed in an institution that is essentially alien, teachers must move beyond curriculum modification, through the introduction of Aboriginal content, to ensuring that classroom based learning is as compatible as possible with learning that takes place outside it (Leavitt, 1994, p. 84). Therefore, schools must be recognized as “critical sites for and agents of negotiation among cultures in contact, not merely transmitters of the means for success in a dominant culture” (Stairs, 1994, p. 155).

The difficulties of cross-cultural negotiation, the process of negotiating identity as it evolves through the interactions between cultures, in formal classroom settings are experienced by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers. Aboriginal teachers are expected to mediate the inconsistencies between their community and professional roles (Stairs, 1994) and the meeting of the dominant and Aboriginal cultures in all their aspects — material ways of life, social norms, language, knowledge and belief systems and power relations (Lipka & Stairs, 1994, p. 1). Non-Aboriginal teachers are expected to integrate themselves into Aboriginal communities (Taylor, 1995), become familiar with the daily lives of the parents and children (Berger, 1973), adopt Aboriginal methods and values in their classrooms (Leavitt, 1994), and incorporate local concerns into their classrooms (Douglas, 1994). Furthermore, the successful negotiation of the cultural differences inherent in the situation directly impacts the Native students enrolled in the

classrooms (Berger, 1973; Kleinfeld, 1973; Rhodes, 1988; Lipka, 1990; Swisher & Deyhle, 1992; Leavitt, 1994; La France, 1994; Taylor, 1995).

Stairs (1994) traces the progress of cross-cultural research in the education from the questions concerning the “what,” which led to language and content changes, to “how” questions, which examined environmental and social relations to the current interest in “why” questions, which focus on understanding world view, values and belief systems. It is at the level of investigation which examines “teaching within the value model of the culture” that the process of “culture-in-the-making” is addressed which offers the hope of cultural survival through “evolving identities as alternatives to assimilation” (p. 164, 167). The desire of Aboriginal people to achieve a “one-world, culturally orientated educational system” (Jones-Sparck, 1994, p. 208) requires that issues of world view, values, and belief systems be addressed.

### Description of the Study

This qualitative study focuses on the socialization experiences of Aboriginal teachers from Northern Canada that influence their beliefs, attitudes, and the choices which they make in the development of their classroom learning environments. The researcher sought to understand what values Aboriginal teachers perceived as important and how these values are manifested in their classroom learning environments. Further, the researcher was interested in exploring the connection between Aboriginal teachers’ articulated values and traditional teachings, a term which refers to “the body of knowledge, values, and practices that are developed, transformed over time, and are then

passed down through the generations” (Goulet, 1989, p. 2). Finally, the researcher sought to identify with the participants, the particular aspects of their classroom learning environments and accompanying value-based rationale which they recommended sharing with teachers-in-training, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

### Research Questions

Three major research questions frame this exploratory study.

1. Are there traditional Aboriginal socialization practices that influence Aboriginal teachers’ perceptions, attitudes, and choices when developing their classroom learning environments?
2. Is there a connection between Aboriginal teachers’ articulated values and traditional teachings?
3. Which aspects of Aboriginal teachers’ classroom learning environments and the accompanying value-based rationales would they recommend be included in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers’ training?

### Supplementary Questions

The supplementary questions which served to guide the research are as follows:

1. How do families, extended families, and communities assist Aboriginal children to become responsible, contributing members of the group?
2. What aspects of this socialization do Aboriginal teachers identify as being relevant to their own experiences?

3. How do Aboriginal teachers apply experiences which they had while growing up in their families and communities to their development of classroom learning environments?
4. What are the indicators that inform Aboriginal teachers of their successful development of classroom learning environments?
5. Are there aspects of their classroom learning environments and an accompanying value-based rationale that they would recommend as being important to include in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers' training?

### Significance of the Study

The research addresses gaps in the current research literature regarding Aboriginal teachers by (a) providing for representation of a group of Aboriginal teachers not previously represented in the academic literature, (b) expanding the existing academic literature that focuses on Aboriginal teachers working in predominantly northern regions, and (c) expanding the existing literature that focuses on Aboriginal teachers' perceptions and experiences in the classroom setting. The research also contributes to the academic literature regarding teacher training and professional development for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers. Finally, by conducting this research study, the researcher and the participants assisted in correcting a limiting situation existing in current academic research that characteristically involves non-Aboriginal researchers working with Aboriginal teachers.

## The Setting

The participants in this research study come from an area of Canada known as the Northwest Territories. The North is often referred to as the most barren, isolated, bitterly cold, inhospitable region of Canada. Yet, the Aboriginal people of the North have inhabited their homeland since time immemorial, traditionally living out on the land following a seasonal round of activities which sustained them economically, socially, politically, and spiritually. Organized in small hunting/trapping and fishing camps, based on kinship, their ties to their land, the spiritual world, and to each other were strong and reciprocal. Despite the enormous changes which the Aboriginal people have endured and struggled to adapt to since the significant migration of Euro-Canadians northward began in the 1940s, many of the traditional “spiritual, cultural and political characteristics have persisted through generations and are evident today, albeit occasionally in differing forms” (Ryan, 1995, p. 2). During the past few decades, the North has become Canada’s frontier, yet it has been the homeland of the Dene and Inuit peoples for many thousands of years.

While it is recognized that education is the most vital aspect of a culture’s integrity, it is only recently that Aboriginal people in the Northwest Territories have gained some measure of control over the formal education of their children. While developing culturally relevant curriculum, community participation in the development of educational policy, and training and employment of Aboriginal teachers has occurred, Aboriginal students are still dropping out, youth unemployment remains high, and skills continue to deteriorate with each generation, and the problems associated with



alcoholism and the accompanying social ills continue to plague the communities (Barnaby, Shimp, & Struthers, 1991). To date, formal education in the North has continued to fail many Aboriginal students, leaving them ill prepared to take their place as responsible contributing members of their communities. Thus, there is an obvious need for the development of an understanding of education from the perspective of those for whom the North is and remains a homeland and implementation of an education system which addresses their needs, goals, and desires.

### Background of the Researcher

My personal and professional values have developed from within a framework of biculturalism, having experienced immersion in both Western and Aboriginal cultures at different times during my life. Biculturalism assumes that an individual knows and understands two cultures, can act appropriately in both and has developed a sense of belonging in both without compromising one's personal cultural identity (La Fromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Within the Euro-Canadian cultural context, I view the educational process as the development of knowledge and understanding (Hirst & Peters, 1970) which enables one to progress through life with the ability to function within the Euro-Canadian cultural context. Specifically, at the level of the classroom, acquiring an education means developing critical thinking skills, understanding the principles and content of subject areas, and developing effective study skills within a culturally supportive environment. Education also involves learning to take these acquired skills and understandings and use them to pursue one's own interests and

evolving questions (Holyan, 1993, p. 50).

From my perspective as an Aboriginal person, socialized within both Cree and Dene world views, I view education as a life long process of personal learning through reflection, participation and relationships in family, community (including the community of Nature) and ceremonial life. A bicultural perspective enables me to value the offerings of each culture. It also enables me to bring academic knowledge within the context of my own world view, thereby supplementing academic knowledge with the education which I have received from both the Cree and Dene traditions.

#### Researcher in Relation to the Study

It is due to my experience in the field of education that I chose to undertake this qualitative study from the applied research stance. The purpose of this study is to give voice to the ways in which Aboriginal teachers successfully negotiate the cross-cultural issues which they encounter in their classrooms. These issues are inherent when working in a delivery system that remains brazen with tones of the 1800s and whose providers are trained primarily in delivering services to the majority/dominant population (Duran & Duran, 1995, p. 8). An additional aim of this study is to articulate the values which Aboriginal teachers integrate into their practices with the intent that access to this knowledge will inform the practices of non-Aboriginal teachers who work with Aboriginal students. In addition, this research seeks to “inform action, enhance decision making, and apply knowledge to solve human and social problems” (Patton, 1990, p. 12).

While I brought to the research study my own perspective as an Aboriginal educator with a substantial number of years of cross-cultural experience in the field of education, I felt that this was an asset which allowed for the design of a study from within the theoretical orientation of the qualitative perspective which would “focus upon what people experience and how they interpret the world” (1990, p. 61).

A primary concern which determined the design of my research methods was my particular situation which has also heightened my awareness that all too often Aboriginal people have been the objects of research investigation rather than participants in determining their own voice. Implementing a study which sought the cooperative participation of Aboriginal teachers meant that participants were not thought of as simply ‘informants’ but as full partners in the knowledge creation process who possessed meaningful experience, concerns, and questions (Bishop, 1996). Therefore, I chose to employ a focus group methodology to conduct the research, which provided a “framework within which people [could] respond in a way that [represented] accurately and thoroughly their points of view” (Patton, 1990, p. 24) about the research topic.

Finally, the interpretation of the information and narrative of experiences collected in the focus group interviews was conducted by a researcher who comes from within the context of the culture and educational environment with which the research is concerned. This relationship to the research participants was supportive of the mandate that the “qualitative methodologist must get close enough to the people and situation being studied to personally understand in depth the details of what goes on” (1990, p. 32).

### Researcher Assumptions

The researcher is aware of certain assumptions underlying this study which are as follows:

1. That the Aboriginal teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and choices which they make are influenced by socialization practices related to their upbringing, many of whom have had traditional teachings, while others are socialized in urban settings and have not shared these experiences.
2. That the Aboriginal teachers' traditional values are manifested in the development of their classroom learning environments.
3. That the manifestation of values serves to assist in the creation of a classroom environment supportive of Aboriginal students.
4. That traditional values can be articulated and understood within a cross-cultural context.

### Delimitations

1. The individuals chosen to participate in the study were Aboriginal teachers from the Northwest Territories.
2. The study was conducted among Aboriginal teachers who have had a minimum of one year of teaching experience in the Northwest Territories of Canada.
3. The participants represented Aboriginal teachers from across the Northwest Territories who had chosen to further their professional knowledge through further academic studies.

4. Participation was determined by residence to include Aboriginal people from the Northwest Territories attending the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon campus from January, 1997 to April 1997.

5. Participants of the study are personally known to the researcher as either colleagues, friends, or acquaintances, because the researcher has lived and worked from within the sparsely populated, common cross-cultural environment for twenty-eight years.

### Limitations

1. This study was limited to seven women participants from the Northwest Territories, thereby limiting the generalizability of its findings.

2. Recognizing and respecting the diversity that exists among Aboriginal peoples, the delimiting of this study to participants from the Northwest Territories also serves to delimit the results of the research to the Aboriginal groups living there.

3. Due to the time constraints with regard to completion of this research study, the researcher acknowledges that, despite the richness of the data, it did not cover fully the breadth of cross-cultural or cultural negotiation issues that are possible through an extended series of focused discussions regarding the issues.

4. That the teachers represent only elementary and junior high grades.

### Definition of Terms

Where definitions are not attributed to an author, they have been specified by the

researcher after consultation with the literature.

Aboriginal: The term Aboriginal refers to those people who are self-declared as being descendent from the original inhabitants of the region now designated as Canada, regardless of legal status conferred by the federal government of Canada. In this sense, the term Native may be used as well. Capital letters are used to indicate their national status.

classroom management: The process of creation and the maintenance of the environmental framework from within which the teaching and learning process can evolve.

community: The term “community” is defined by the orientation of Aboriginal peoples who perceive community as the intimate relationship of living things, animate and inanimate.

cross-cultural: This term is used to refer to the interaction between two cultures in contact, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

culture: The collection of values, rules, and attitudes held by a society which allows people to communicate, to interpret behavior, and to attach shared meaning to behavior and events (Brizinski, 1989). According to Kearney (1984), cultures and societies “exist in history through time, are constantly self-creating by responding to historically given conditions, idea systems and culture in general, while having certain autonomy, are primarily responses—continuities—of that which has gone before” (p. 5, cited in Graveline, 1996, p. 17).

cultural negotiation: The process of negotiating identity as it evolves through the

interactions between cultures. Stairs (1994) stipulates that within the context of education, the first premise underlying a cultural negotiation is that school is a cultural phenomenon (p. 155).

cultural blending: The process of cultural negotiation which results in cultural creativity “culture-in-the-making and offers the hope of cultural survival through evolving identities as alternatives to assimilation” (Stairs, 1994, p. 167).

Euro-Canadian: This term is used to indicate the dominant Canadian culture’s orientation to the traditions, values, beliefs, and practices derived from the immigrant cultures of western Europe.

focus group: a qualitative method for gathering data in which several participants are brought together to discuss a topic of mutual interest to themselves and the researcher (Morgan & Spanish, 1984, p. 253).

learning environment: For all of us, there are at least three educational environments. The first is the “formal in-school educational environment. That is the one in the classroom with the teacher-the one we are all familiar with and think of as education” (Rhodes, 1988, p. 25). The second is the formal “out-of-school” educational environment” (p. 25) which includes young children listening to elders’ stories, participating in church services or traditional ceremonies, or taking part in a community healing workshop. The third educational environment is “the informal out-of-school one” (p. 25), learning to walk or talk, learning from observation of the environment, or learning through personal experience of trial and error (young children trying to fish or snare rabbits).

Native: The term Native, used in the generic sense, applies when a generalization holds true for all groups regardless of legal, historical, and political distinctions. It includes status and non-status Indians, Inuit, and Metis. In this sense, the term Aboriginal people may be used as well.

non-Native: This term is used in the general sense to refer to those people who are not self-declared as being of Aboriginal ancestry, who identify themselves as belonging to the dominant Euro-Canadian culture.

socialization: “is the dynamic process that brings human beings into the group, causing an individual to internalize the values, mores, traditions, language, and attitudes of the culture in which they live” (King, Chapman, & Cruz-Janzen, 1994, p. 110). Primary socialization, which takes place during the years of childhood, has the greatest impact on the individual. All secondary socialization, in adulthood, must be filtered and made to fit within the social construction of reality internalized during primary socialization (1994, p. 106).

sui generis: a Latin expression meaning to a class by itself.

traditional: Ortiz, in his definition of traditional, provides a link between world view and tradition. “World view provides people with a distinctive set of values, and identity, a feeling of rootedness, of belonging to a time and place, and a felt sense of continuity of a single lifetime, a tradition which may be said to transcend even time” (cited in Beck and Walters, 1997, p. 5). Paula Gunn-Allen (1986) adds to the discussion of movement and tradition in this way: “The tribal systems are static in that all movement is related to all other movement— that is, harmonious and balanced or unified; they are not static in the



sense that they do not allow or accept change” (cited in Graveline, 1996, p. 16).

traditional values: Those shared expressions of moral, right ways of living articulated by the tribal cultures of Aboriginal peoples.

Western: This term is also used to indicate the dominant north American culture’s orientation to the traditions, values, beliefs, and practices derived from the immigrant cultures of Western Europe.

world view: Ortiz (1973) maintains that world view “denotes a distinctive vision of reality which not only interprets and orders the places and events in the experience of a people, but lends form, direction, and continuity to life as well. World view provides people with a distinctive set of values, and identity, a feeling of rootedness, of belonging to a time and place (cited in Graveline, 1996, p. 14). Further, most Aboriginal people’s world views “seek harmony and integration with all life, including the spiritual, natural, and human domains”(Kawagley, 1993, p. 2).

### Summary

Through the description of the study and the articulation of the research questions, the purpose for the exploration of Aboriginal teachers’ development of classroom learning environments has been presented. Background information on the researcher and clarification of the position of the researcher in the study has been provided. Reference has been made to the qualitative nature of the study and the research method to be used, which is explored further in a literature review provided in Chapter Three. Next, a review of the literature which pertains to the study is provided.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

This literature review begins with a brief examination of education (formal schooling) as it was used by the Euro-Canadian colonizers in their promotion of conversion, assimilation, and integration of Aboriginal peoples, a process of colonization which is still manifested in today's classrooms as scenes of cross-cultural conflict. Then, an overview of general research topics related to issues in Aboriginal education is presented. Next, academic literature documenting the relationship between teacher practices and teacher values is reviewed. Finally, evidence from the literature which supports the need for this study is summarized.

#### **Historical Background**

Formal education, schooling, as society's means of transmitting culture and world view to succeeding generations is, historically, an accepted concept in Euro-Canadian culture. Schools have been, and continue to be, the primary tool for socializing children into the dominant Euro-Canadian cultural "values, mores, traditions, language, and attitudes" (King, Chipman & Cruz-Janzen, 1994, p. 110).

For nearly five centuries, education has also been the primary tool used in North America to colonize Aboriginal peoples. A review of the literature reveals four distinct phases in the process of colonization through formal education: (1) education as a tool for conversion (Janen, 1986; Longboat, 1986; Miller, 1989; Trigger, 1991); (2) education as a tool for complete assimilation based on the assumption that assimilation was “the only possible euthanasia of savage communities” (Miller, 1989, p. 100); (3) education as a means of changing the “lifestyle and value system” (Miller, 1987, p. 3) of Aboriginal peoples to that of the European newcomers by teaching alternative economic skills (Miller, 1989, p. 103); and (4), in the twentieth century, education as a tool for implementing the policy of integration of Aboriginal peoples without their consent (Miller, 1987, p. 3). Under the colonial policies of the “new world”, schooling became a powerful vehicle for the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples (Lipka & Stairs, 1994, p. 1). Thus, formal schooling has been either a tool of cultural transmission for the Euro-Canadian population or a tool of cultural imperialism when imposed upon Aboriginal peoples (Battiste, 1995).

Though Aboriginal people have always been interested in educating their children, an interest that has been manifested in their treaty negotiations for schools (Henderson, 1995, p. 245), they have not been enthusiastic about the colonizer’s schools. Miller (1982) confirms that Aboriginal people “often wanted the services of teachers, but for their own purposes: they wanted learning, but not the accompanying assimilation efforts that were central to the purposes of officials and preachers” (p. 102). The central problem contributing to the failure of Aboriginal education has been a history of teaching

“civilization while creating violence and expecting assimilation while practicing segregation” (Iverson, 1978, p. 175).

The consequent failure of the Euro-Canadian education system to provide education for Aboriginal students is documented by Berger (1994) in terms of Canadian national drop-out rates for Grades One to Twelve, reported at 12 per cent for non-Aboriginal students and 94 per cent for Aboriginal students (p. 449). Other academic writers summarize the discussion of the failure of Aboriginal education as being “largely ineffective” (Rhodes, 1988), yet succeeding in “eroding human consciousness within Aboriginal communities” (Battiste, 1995, p. viii) — in effect, “miseducation” (Kneen & Posluns, 1994).

The seeds for cultural conflict with regard to formal education that were sown in the 1600's have resulted in a twentieth century education system which continues to deny Aboriginal peoples the recreation of education *sui generis*. More recently, Lipka and Stairs (1994) confirm schools as sites of cultural conflict and cultural negotiation for teachers and students when they state that “the cultural negotiation of schools is embedded in a forum for the meeting of dominant and small cultures in all their aspects— language, social norms, material way of life, knowledge and belief systems, and power relationships” (p. 1).

### Classrooms Today

The reality of schools for classroom teachers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, working with Aboriginal students is that they are daily confronted with the classroom as

a scene of cultural conflict and negotiation (Morrow, 1987; Orioux, 1988; Oaks, 1988; Stairs, 1995; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). Orioux (1988) refers to teachers as “key agents” in the educational process who bring to the classroom the “accumulation of their individual cultural backgrounds” (p. 61). Stairs (1995) confirms the importance of classroom teachers as “cultural transmitters”, recognizing that in the education process, teachers bring with them their fund of knowledge, their culturally patterned ways of organizing and passing on knowledge, and the value systems of their communities, especially by defining what is important to learn and the most appropriate way to learn it (p. 28). When teachers and students are of the Euro-Canadian cultural background, cultural content and processes are transmitted, and school becomes a means of cultural transmission. When they are not, classrooms become sites of cultural imperialism (Battiste, 1995) or scenes of clashing values. Oaks (1988) further articulates the nature of the conflict in Euro-Canadian classrooms by describing a school environment which encourages “competitiveness and individual academic, athletic, and extra curricular achievement” rather than an environment which promotes the Aboriginal educational values of “generosity and working together for the benefit of the group” (p. 43).

La France (1994) articulates Aboriginal students’ perspective of the situation by saying, “Our experience with past and current Western schooling, however, is that it separates ‘education’ from living; the experience alienates us from our surroundings and, therefore, our culture (p. 20).

## Overview of Related Research

An examination of the historical background of Aboriginal education confirms that the school and the classroom as cultural sites are not new concepts (Stairs, 1994). Yet, the research has historically focused primarily on the individual learner (Millard, 1993; Swisher & Deyhle, 1997). In the late 1960 s the cultural-deficit or deprivation hypothesis “attributed poor academic performance to differences between children’s home learning methods and environments and those of the school” (Swisher & Deyhle, 1989, p. 1). The assumption was that Aboriginal children were coming from “meager” homes with “limited backgrounds” (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997, p. 123), a position that served to rationalize the continued need for “enriching Eurocentric experiences” (1997, p. 123),but did not recognize the continued failure of schools to meet the academic needs of Aboriginal students. As a result, Millard (1993) explains that the “culturally deprived” child was “researched and treated as having a learning disability” (p. 5).

Anthropology has long focused on cultural transmission practices in society and captured the essence of that practice through ethnographic field-based techniques often used for educational research (Millard, 1993). This association is not surprising when it is recalled that “the purpose of education in both its traditional and its modern form is cultural transmission” ( p.4). Stairs (1994) acknowledges the importance of this research trend when she states, “The rise of classroom microethnography was a turning point in the cultural understanding of education” (p. 155).

### Curriculum Research

Since the beginning of the 1970s, ethnographic research approaches have gained prominence as legitimate educational foundations. Spindler (1974), a noted professor of both anthropology and education, has found that “much of what passes as formal education in modern schools can be better understood as ritualized reaffirmation of cultural patterns transmitted earlier in less explicit ways” (p. 32). More recently, educators and researchers in schools, colleges, and universities have responded to the need to recognize the cultural differences of Aboriginal students. Studies were conducted which offered advice to non-Native teachers in Native classrooms (Kaulback, 1984; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989, Sawyer, 1991; Stairs, 1991; Gilliland, 1992; Barnhardt, 1992; and Leavitt, 1994) in attempts to adapt curriculum to Native students’ cultural needs by altering the curricula to include more culturally relevant materials. In fact, most provinces have undertaken curriculum adaptation as a major focus of their equity plans. However, Stairs (1995) has noted that these results have failed to affect “the learning-teaching processes in the education of Native children” (p. 139).

### Learning Styles Research

Learning style theory— the concept that there are different, measurable student cognitive or learning style preferences— has held a prominent place in the research on Aboriginal education since the 1980's. Some researchers have sought to show that Aboriginal students had a learning style, distinctive from that of non-Aboriginal students, which was based on a “watch-then-do” and “concrete vs. abstract” processes (More,

1987), “holistic intuitive learning” (Gilliland, 1995), and “holistic understanding and learning-before-trying” (Rhodes, 1988). Other researchers have examined teaching implications in response to learning style test results (Kaulback, 1984; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; Sawyer, 1991; Foreman, 1991; Reyhner, 1992).

Some researchers have sought to dispel any further stereotyping of Aboriginal children by cautioning against adopting labels without critical inquiry into the theory of a distinct Aboriginal learning style (Pepper & Henry, 1986; Chrisjohn, 1988). Gilliland (1995) also points out that the variety of inherited abilities and the variety among tribal cultures further affect the diversity of children’s learning styles (p. 68). Yet, Millard (1993) observes that there has been scant research demonstrating changes in non-Aboriginal teaching styles in response to learning styles research (p. 7). Finally, Stairs contends that the essence of Aboriginal education issues are more complex than the definition or labeling of individual learning styles. Issues are defined by the essentially cultural nature of education (1994, p. 121) and the negotiation which takes place in the meeting of dominant and small cultures in all their aspects— knowledge and belief systems, and power relationships (1994, p. 1). The inherent risk in focusing on the definition or labeling of individual learning styles is that such practice may lead to the mistaken assumption that identifying compatible teaching/learning styles will result in “quick fix” solutions to the complex, essentially cultural, issues in Aboriginal education.

### Teachers in the Research

Research concerning Aboriginal teachers has spanned a range of topics from the



congruence between learning and teaching styles (Tamaoka, 1986) to research which supports the efforts of colleges and universities to train Aboriginal teachers (Barnhardt, 1974; Mc Eachern & Kirkness, 1987; McAlpine, Cross, Whiteduck, & Wolforth, 1990; Wolforth, 1991). The assumption is that even though the teacher training takes place in a Euro-Canadian educational institution, the student's birth into an Aboriginal cultural setting would ultimately define his/her approach to teaching (Millard, 1993, p. 8).

Bullivant (1984), Douglas (1994) and Stairs (1995) acknowledge Aboriginal teachers' roles as cultural brokers for their communities, describing the new cultural role of "native educator" as one of "brokerage" between the formal school and traditional Native learning processes (Stairs, 1995, p. 281). Further clarification of the role expectation of Aboriginal teachers is provided by Stairs' observation that "while non-Native teachers identify primarily with the school and work towards bringing the community into the school, Native teachers identify with their community and its goals and work to bring the school into the community" (1995, p. 147). Thus, Aboriginal teachers are cast into a role of "culture broker," with the expectation that through their work in classrooms, they will mediate the conflicting cross-cultural environment of the schools in which they teach.

### Teacher Practices and Teacher Values

The link between teachers' values and practices is articulated by Lyons (1990) who notes that "knowledge and values are important dimensions of teaching, implicit in a teachers' sense of mission and critical to a conception of practice" (p. 161). Other researchers support the concept of a relationship between teacher values and classroom

practices (Morrow, 1987; Orioux, 1988; Osborne, 1989; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989; Stairs, 1995). Morrow (1987) asserts that communities give teachers the task of conveying the “cultural whole,” a perspective referred to as “moral” or “teaching within the value model of the culture” (p. 164). Swisher and Deyhle (1989) conclude that a teacher’s individual approach to teaching and learning is influenced by the “values, norms and socialization practices of the culture in which that individual has been enculturated” (p. 82). Further, there are the students, socialized within the norms, values and customs of their communities, who bring their community-based knowledge and practice to the classrooms. Lyons recognizes the dynamic of student-teacher interaction by acknowledging that values impact the relationship between the teacher and the student. Thus, “implicitly or explicitly epistemological and ethical dimensions exist in the social and intellectual relationships between teacher and student in everyday interaction” (p. 172). Orioux (1988) adds that while some students cope successfully in classrooms where a discrepancy in values and goals exists, other students “develop behavioral conflicts, low self esteem and low confidence levels” (pp. 43, 44). Osborne (1989) feels that teachers from ethnic minorities should be encouraged to share the dilemmas inherent in reconciling the irreconcilable values of home and school and articulate their resolutions for both mainstream teachers and their students (p. 19). To summarize, the research clearly establishes a link between teacher values and classroom practices.

Finally, Lyons notes that, “in spite of continued recognition of the significance of the value and ethical aspects of teaching, and even of their complexity, they have not often been investigated empirically from the teacher’s point of view” (p. 161).

Therefore, this study may be of relevant interest to mainstream educators as well as the discourse surrounding Aboriginal education issues.

### Summary

Schools, as social institutions, continue to reflect the dominant culture's values and priorities, thereby maintaining the status and power inequities between Aboriginal people and the dominant Euro-Canadian society, inequities which trace their roots to the 1600's and the Jesuit missionaries first attempts at education for conversion. Barman, Hébert and McCaskill (1986) state that the "key to the future of any society lies in the transmission of its culture and world view to succeeding generations. The socialization of children through education shapes all aspects of identity" (p. 1). Acknowledging the truth of their statements and the dismal history of Aboriginal education, it becomes clear that what Aboriginal people may need is "not a grafting of Indian content and personnel onto European structures, but a redefinition of education" (Noley, 1981, cited in Hampton, 1995, p. 10). Kawagley (1993) asserts that Aboriginal peoples' "view of the world and approach to education has been brought into jeopardy with the onslaught of Western social systems and institutionalized forms of cultural transmission" (p. 2). He is not alone in his assertion that the Western education system has brought cultural discontinuity and conflict to Aboriginal peoples. Barman, Hébert, and McCaskill (1986) reflect upon the dismissal of vital and coherent Aboriginal cultures as irrelevant by the European "new comers," resulting in assumed European superiority and assimilationist goals (p. 2). Cummins (1992) notes the long history of subjugation and overt racism which has led to

school failure for Aboriginal students banned from speaking their native languages and practicing traditional religions. Jones-Sparck (1994) describes living in Aboriginal communities as walking “in two worlds, akin to serving two masters within oneself” (p. 207). As La France (1994) concludes, “it is extremely difficult to be educated in a western way and, culturally remain who we are” (p. 20). Today, the struggle to maintain cultural integrity and to survive as Aboriginal peoples is a predominant issue and an everyday reality (Emerson, 1987, p. 37).

As more Aboriginal students begin to graduate from master’s and doctoral degree level university programs, their research in Aboriginal education has begun to acknowledge the redefinition of Aboriginal education as a possible solution. In fact, Hampton (1995) has echoed Noley as he described the fifth and final phase of Aboriginal education as, “*Indian Education Sui Generis* . . . a self determined Indian education using models of education structured by Indian cultures” (p. 10). These features of success among Aboriginal students will have to move from “cultural inclusion to cultural base in the conceptualization and implementation of Native education . . . movement which rests on the progressive incorporation of schools into the Native cultural context” (Stairs, 1995, p. 150). Kawagley (1993) offers alternatives through the exploration of contrasting values and principles “that take the best from the two worlds and reconstruct a world to fit the times” (p. 6). Implicit in these assertions is the need to identify the best of traditional values as well as the “best” of Eurocentric education, which would then act as the foundation for Indian education sui generis.

Stairs traces the process of cultural negotiation of Aboriginal education as

beginning with “an almost exclusive focus on language [where] meaning is seen to be conveyed through language, and the language carries culture” (1994, p. 161). She concludes that in part, “this starting place reflects the overwhelming emphasis western formal education has placed on language . . . and, in part, it reflects the increasing focus of indigenous communities on language renewal as a path of cultural survival” (1994, p. 161). In her book, *The Invisible Culture*, Susan Philips (1983) points out that “it is as if we have been able to recognize that there are important cultural differences in *what* people learn, but not *how* they learn” (p. 133). Classroom microethnography led us to “focus on the *how* of ecological and social levels of meaning and cultural negotiation, primarily within the classroom boundary” (Stairs, 1994, p. 163). Recently, the movement has shifted from “negotiation of culture, from the ‘how’ to “why”, [investigating education from] a perspective we would call ‘moral’, that is teaching within the value of the culture” (1994, p. 164).

This literature review has investigated issues concerning: (a) the development of cross-cultural conflict in Aboriginal education; (b) various focal points of educational research in Aboriginal education; (c) the current emphasis on creating Indian education *sui generis*; and (4) conceptualization of education as a process of cultural negotiation. Through conducting this literature review, it also became apparent that the preponderance of the research concerning Aboriginal education has been carried out by non-Aboriginal researchers functioning within the Euro-Canadian academic paradigm. Consequently, the absence of Aboriginal voice continues as Aboriginal people remain the objects of investigation. Recent innovations such as altering the use of academic

language, replacing the terms “informant” or “subject” with “participant” or “respondents” (American Psychological Association, 1995, p. 49) simply addressed the appearance of the study, not the objective observer stance. The lack of recognition afforded to Aboriginal teachers as experts in the process and practice of cross-cultural negotiation is apparent by the absence of their voices. Thus, the literature review sets the scene for the exploration of Aboriginal teachers’ development of classroom learning environments and their articulation of the values, attitudes and beliefs upon which their developmental practices are based.

The desire to present the voices of Aboriginal teachers in this study necessitated the identification of a research methodology which would facilitate their participation in the research process by providing an opportunity to consider and share their understanding of their work and cultural knowledge, a natural flow of conversation, and an environment which promoted acceptance for the contributions of each participant. These requirements resulted in the choice of the focus group methodology which is discussed in Chapter Three, beginning with a literature review and concluding with a description of the data collection and analysis process.

# **CHAPTER THREE**

## **REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCEDURES**

### **Introduction**

The search for a culturally appropriate research methodology, which facilitated the sharing of knowledge and experiences process envisioned by the researcher and met the requirements of an academic research study, was an exploration that resembled traveling a twisting turning path that meandered through the preliminary survey of the academic literature, finally coming to the end of the journey with the discovery of the focus group methodology. This research methodology; (a) met the perceived need for a culturally-appropriate format for data collection; (b) allowed the participants to experience a synergistic learning process as part of their participation; (c) facilitated the presentation of the Aboriginal teachers' cultural knowledge and experiences through their own voices; and (d) provided a participatory role for the researcher. The following literature review is presented to assist the reader in understanding the choice of research methodology and for others embarking upon similar quests.

This literature review explores the history and the development of focus groups as a method for qualitative research. Once the background of the focus group

methodology has been provided, the review moves to research literature which places the focus group method within the research context of the study. Topics considered are (a) focus groups as qualitative research; (b) the focus group method in the research context; (c) the researcher in the focus-group process; (d) the focus group size; and (e) criteria for and selection of group participants. Finally, the chapter concludes with a description of the data collection and data analysis processes undertaken throughout the study.

### Focus Groups as Qualitative Research

Morgan and Spanish (1984) have described focus groups as a qualitative method for gathering data in which several participants are brought together to discuss a topic of mutual interest to themselves and the researcher. Focus groups have their origins in market research and are led by a moderator who is often the researcher. They are “video- or audio-taped small group discussions that explore topics selected by the researcher and are typically timed to last no more than two hours. The data collected from focus group sessions are typically analyzed qualitatively” (p. 254). As a relatively new social science research tool, focus groups have come to represent an important addition to the methodology, assisting in breaking down narrow methodological barriers. Morgan and Spanish confirm that “as a qualitative technique, focus groups both add to the available range of techniques in this area and provide yet another chance to demonstrate more qualitatively orientated research” (p. 254). Comparatively, focus groups fall somewhere between the two poles of participant observation, where information is collected from observing people in action and direct interviewing, which involves the researcher and a



single informant. They produce information which was directed by the researcher, but collected within groups of participants. “In essence, the strengths of focus groups come from a compromise between the strengths found in other qualitative methods” (1984, p. 260). Since the focus groups constitute a compromise, they are neither as strong as direct interviewing is with regard to the probing of informant knowledge nor as strong as participant observation with regard to the naturalistic observation of interaction. Yet, “they do a better job of combining these two goals than either of the other two techniques” (1984, p. 260). Morgan (1988) supports the idea that focus groups combine some aspects of both individual interviews and participant observation and adds that, “the main advantage of focus groups is the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a specific topic in a limited period of time” (pp. 15, 16). Furthermore, Sevier (1989) contends that the greatest strength of focus groups is, “the willingness of participants to discuss a particular subject openly and in great detail, often [raising] issues not previously anticipated by the moderator” (p. 5).

It is important for researchers to also note the disadvantages of focus groups in comparison to other qualitative methods. According to Morgan, the level of control over the group which the moderator exercises may be the “single largest disadvantage of focus groups in comparison to participant observation” (1988, p. 17), while in comparison to interviews, the main disadvantage is in “the relatively chaotic data collection” (p. 18). Finally, there is general agreement upon the practicality of using focus groups for research which is primarily exploratory in nature (Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Krueger, 1994).

A general overview of the origins of focus group methodology and the comparison with other qualitative forms of research has been presented. Next, this review will discuss the aspects of focus group research which made this a suitable means of inquiry when working with the Aboriginal participants in this study.

### Focus Group Method in the Research Context

The review of the literature concerning qualitative research clearly indicates that the task for the qualitative researcher is to “provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their points of view about the world, or that part of the world about which they are talking” (Patton, 1990, p. 24). Due to the cross-cultural nature of the study, the first critical consideration when planning the research was to identify a methodology that facilitated comfort and participation in an individual and group process of reflective exploration for the participants. “Sensitivity is essential in environments where disenfranchised people are cautious to share their views with those in power” (Krueger, 1994, p. xx) or participate in research processes which are derived from the dominant Euro-Canadian culture. Further critical considerations were the need to provide enough structure to address specific research questions, yet allow for a wide variety of individual responses to be validated, and the need for the method to encompass discussion which allowed for story-telling to personal narrative and yet would yield useful data. Finally, a research method was required which provided a methodology supportive of the exploratory nature of the research topic.

The decision to use the focus group as the primary research method for this study

was further supported by the review of the research which revealed that focus groups are “commonly used for a more intensive study of perceptions, attitudes, motivations, etc. than a standardized interview permits” (Selltiz, Jahoda, Deutsch, & Cook, 1971, p. 263). Further, Morgan (1988) states that an advantage of group interviewing, “is that the participants’ interaction among themselves replaces their interaction with the interviewer, leading to greater emphasis on participants’ points of view” (p. 18). Morgan further contends that the “hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (p. 12). As the research goal was to arrive at an articulation of participant practices and traditional values, these were important factors related to the choice of the focus group method. Finally, focus groups, “excel at uncovering *why* participants think as they do” (p. 25) and answering the *why* of Aboriginal teachers’ practices with regard to the development of classroom learning environments was a primary focus of the research. Thus, the focus group technique, which is “a tool for studying ideas in a group context” (p. 5) was supported by the literature as an appropriate means of obtaining data relevant to the research questions.

Also, the use of a focus group process facilitated the development of a shared exploration of the research topic. The group format provided for the statements of one participant to initiate a chain reaction of additional comments, allowed for the security of a group discussion which encouraged candid responses and valued individual perspectives, and afforded the freedom for participants to answer only the questions with which they were comfortable; particular characteristics of focus group interviews noted

by Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996). Thus, the focus group methodology met the articulated need to use a research process which facilitated the comfort and participation of the Aboriginal participants in a group-orientated process.

The focus group method also offered “a stronger mechanism for placing the control over [group] interaction in the hands of the participants rather than the researcher” (Morgan, 1988, p. 21). While the researcher may ask questions of direct interest to the research, participants exercise control over their participation in the discussion, chose when to respond without the pressure of having to refuse to answer an interviewer’s direct question, and may, during the discussion, choose to pose their own questions to other members in the group. Thus, the focus group provides for individual control and autonomy within a group setting, a condition which enhanced the perceived need to afford Aboriginal participants a role in control of the research, rather than becoming simply objects of the research process. Finally, the primary assumptions of focus group interviews are that people are valuable sources of information about themselves and their environment and that much can be learned from direct, extended conversations with individuals whose thoughts and opinions are critical for understanding a topic (Lederman, 1990). Thus, the academic, experiential, and cultural knowledge of the Aboriginal participants is validated through the focus group process.

In summary, focus groups are a desirable method of qualitative research when the researcher “desires to emerge from the group. Focus groups possess the capacity to [provide] more than the sum of [the contributions of] their participants, to exhibit a synergy that individuals alone can not achieve” (Krueger, 1994, p. 45). Research

regarding the traditional values which Aboriginal teachers integrate into their classrooms and articulate through the development of classroom learning environments is, at present, exploratory in nature. The quality of data obtained through the focus group method is enhanced by the synergistic nature of the group process.

### Researcher in the Focus Group Process

The focus group technique provided for a role to be played by the researcher in the research setting. As a form of qualitative research the focus group format is basically a group interview in which the “reliance is on interaction within the group, based on topics that are supplied by the researcher” (Morgan, 1988, p. 10). One advantage of group interviewing is that, “the participants’ interaction among themselves replaces their interaction with the interviewer, leading to greater emphasis on the participants’ point of view” (p. 18) and enhancing the stance of the researcher neutrality in the data collection process. The researcher also kept a journal of the research process which includes personal reflections regarding: (a) the focus group process; (b) the participants’ discussion and on-going insights with regard to the development of their classroom environments; (c) general themes articulated during the focused discussions; and (d) the researcher’s own experiences with regard to the research topic. The purpose of the reflective journal was for making sense of the data, to look inward at one’s perceptions and outward to the voices of the participants.

The role of the researcher in the study was to obtain understanding and insight. The focus group moderator approach assumes that the participants have the knowledge

relevant to the research and, if asked, they will share it. Within the context of this approach to the moderator's role, it is acknowledged in the literature that the moderator may have considerable knowledge of the topic to be discussed (Krueger, 1994).

Within the literature one finds that focus group interviewing also allows for using a moderator and an assistant moderator. "Within this team approach each individual has certain tasks to perform" (1994, p. 103). The moderator is primarily concerned with facilitating the discussion and keeping the conversation flowing by using "a guide that has been prepared in advance, based on the research objectives, and [seeking] to have the participants do most of the talking based on the probes in the guide" (Greenbaum, 1993, p. 2). The assistant moderator operates the tape recorder and records notes which name the speakers as they contribute to the discussion, recording enough of each speaker's contribution to allow for positive identification of the speakers during the transcription of the taped interview. The assistant is also helpful in performing the post-meeting analysis of the session and reviewing the data analysis of the sessions. "A second set of eyes and ears increases both the total accumulation of information and the analysis" (Krueger, 1994, p. 104). Since the provision of research conditions which would enhance the attention to research validity and the reliability of the data collection pertained to this study, a moderator team comprised of the researcher as moderator and a trained assistant moderator was used. Researcher reflections regarding the use of an assistant moderator are provided in the conclusion portion of the thesis.

Focus groups have been used increasingly with ethnic or racial groups. "When conducting focus groups in the environment of such groups, it is essential that

researchers understand the culture and traditions” (Krueger, 1994, p. 216). As noted by Krueger, many research projects based on Native subjects have historically been guided and controlled by non-Native researchers from positions of power and influence. As a result, there may be a tendency to assume that other individuals from the outside, and particularly those who are non-Native, want information to maintain control and influence. Therefore, as the research indicates, it is beneficial to have a moderator and assistant moderator from a similar cultural background as the participants. In summary, “focus groups are effective means of obtaining information from special audiences. The focus group is able to produce meaningful information and to do so in a manner that shows respect for traditions and uses culture as an advantage” (1994, p. 217).

#### Focus Group Size—Literature and Research Process

Today, researchers employ at least three different kinds of qualitative research methods which are called focus groups. They are classified by types: full groups, mini-groups, and telephone groups. While all types have some aspects in common, each type also has areas of significant difference (Greenbaum, 1993).

The mini-group format was used for this study. The process for each mini-group consisted of a discussion of approximately 120 minutes, led by the researcher/moderator who conducted the session. The rationale for using the mini-group session was that, “with the mini-group the time per person is doubled, thus enabling the moderator to receive more information from each individual” (1993, p. 3) and ensuring that there will be time for individuals to reflect upon the ideas offered by other participants in the group.

Further, the focused nature of the discussions and the limited time kept participants from attempting to come to consensus on issues which were raised in this exploratory study. Finally, the mini-group format also facilitates in studies in which there is a small number of qualified participants. There were two focus group sessions conducted for this study, each group being comprised of different participants. The first group consisted of four participants, the researcher/moderator, and the assistant moderator. The second group consisted of three participants, the researcher/moderator, and the assistant moderator. While the original research plan had been to have an equal number of participants in each group, conditions beyond the control of the researcher resulted in having three participants for the second group. When comparing the amount of data obtained from the two groups, the group with fewer members produced less data, but the quality of information with regard to participants' responses to the moderator's questions was comparable for each group session. Further data analysis also revealed that participants from both groups individually contributed to their respective group discussions in a manner that provided an equivalent amount of data from each person.

#### Criteria and Selection of Participants—Literature and Research Process

Participants were solicited from among the Aboriginal student group from the Northwest Territories attending the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP) at the University of Saskatchewan during the time when the research was being conducted. Participant selection criteria also included: (1) a minimum of one-year previous teaching experience, (2) with Aboriginal students, (3) in a school located in a community in the



Northwest Territories.

The specific selection of participants for this research project was appropriate, since “by definition, a focus group is not a representative sample of the population. The research project requires that participants meet certain criteria to be eligible for inclusion in the group” (Bers & Smith, 1988, p. 54). The selection of focus group participants was an important part of the development of the research program. As confirmed by Sevier (1988), focus group participants are recruited who are representative of the populations in which the researcher is most interested.

There were several reasons for establishing this particular set of participant criteria. First, the late advent of formal education in Northern communities, successful resistance to participation in residential schools, maintenance of family orientated land-based life styles, and the current mixed-subsistence economy of Northern Aboriginal communities (Abel, 1993; Berger, 1989, 1991; & Macpherson, 1991) are factors which have all contributed to the continuance of traditional values. Second, participants have similar post-secondary education experiences which provide them with shared knowledge of the academic discourse. Third, all participants have previous teaching experience which indicated that participants had experience in the creation of classroom learning environments. Finally, previous events in the development of Aboriginal education in the North indicate that members of this group, due in part to their attainment of academic accreditation in addition to their cultural and geographical origins, will become the future educational leaders for the Northwest Territories.

Further, the preponderance of the research suggests that participants from a

common background, with a shared interest in the research topic make for more successful group interviews. (Morgan, 1988; Sevier, 1989; Krueger, 1994; Vaughn, et al. 1996). Therefore, the focus group participants identified to collaborate in the study were chosen and placed in focus groups with due consideration for the similarity of their backgrounds, their personal compatibility, and their shared interest in the research subject.

In summary, the conclusion of the researcher after conducting the focus group interviews coincides with the support for group compatibility found in the literature. The small focus group size and similarity of participants' background with regard to academic education, classroom experience, geographical location and lifestyle facilitated: (a) time for all participants to share their personal approach to creating classroom environments; (b) the opportunity to consider and share their understanding of the relationship between classroom environments and cultural knowledge; (c) and the opportunity to participate in a focus group environment which promoted acceptance for the contributions of each participant, as indicated by the murmurs and nods of assent and the shared laughter generated in the group by participants' stories and observations. Furthermore, there was time for reflection about the contributions of others in the group which resulted in an exchange of ideas and the group synergism for which focus groups are noted. The importance of the opportunity for participants to exchange ideas is particularly discernable during the discussion regarding Native and non-Native students' responses to teacher instructions located in the presentation of the data in chapter four. Further, the participants' had previously established personal relationships through their association

during their two years in the ITEP program. Therefore, the focus group discussions took place as part of a continued relationship.

Finally, the relaxed atmosphere of the focus group sessions, the laughter, and the participants' willingness to share their stories, perceptions, and ideas signified to the researcher that the opportunity to be asked for their opinions, the knowledge that their presentation would remain anonymous, and the belief that they would be heard and their contribution would be considered valuable all contributed to the enjoyment of the focus group experience.

#### Data Analysis—Literature and Research Process

Focus-group data analysis varies with the research purpose, complexity of design, and “extent to which conclusions can be easily reached based on simple analysis” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 102). The data analysis process undertaken during this research study involved nine steps; (a) identification and verification of major themes with the participants from each focus group session; (b) further clarification of the “big ideas” by the researcher/moderator and the assistant moderator; (c) transcription of the data and entry into a computer word processing program; (d) review of the transcripts by focus group participants with regard to accuracy and completeness (e) development of a classification system of major topics and issues; (f) coding of the data for participant identification; (g) the use of a “cut-and-paste” method for unitizing the data; (h) sorting the units into major topics and issues categories which provided the organizational themes for the units of data; and (i) cross-focus-group analysis.

At the close of each focus group session, the researcher/moderator and assistant moderator reviewed the major themes which surfaced during the focus group's discussion. Participants were asked to verify the themes and add any others which they could identify. Further, heeding the process outlined by Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub (1996), the researcher/moderator and the assistant moderator again considered "the participants' words, ideas that occupied the focus group, and the intensity of participants' responses, clarifying and further identifying major themes that represented findings from the focus groups" (p. 107). These were the big ideas, impressions rather than definite findings, which were arrived at during the researcher/moderator and assistant moderator debriefing discussions following the focus group sessions.

The initial step in the analysis procedures required the transcription of the interviews. The transcription was done by the researcher/moderator. The original plan to enlist the services of a professional transcription service were altered for two reasons; (a) the cost of transcription was an impediment; and (b) through the transcription process, the researcher's knowledge of the transcripts' content was improved, thereby facilitating further analysis. In addition, the transcripts enabled further analysis through the provision of a written record of the focus group interviews, entered in the Word Perfect 6.1 word processing program, thus allowing for computer-assisted coding and data preparation once unitization had been completed.

After color coding the participants' individual contributions contained in the transcripts of the focus group sessions, the text was examined using the "cut-and-paste method" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p. 105) and sorted according to material which

was relevant to each major topic. This cutting and sorting process was completed by cutting the color coded text into discrete units of information. A unit consisting of the smallest amount of information that was informative by itself with units varying in size from a paragraph to a sentence or phrase, each unit being a direct quotation from a participant in the focus group (Vaughn, et al., 1996). Then, the units were once again coded by participant and transcribed according to their correspondence to major topics, thereby yielding heuristic units of information. The resulting major topics and issues categories formed the “superordinate headings that provided the organizational theme for the units of data” (1966, p. 107). The complete data sorting process was conducted for the transcriptions of each focus group. Then cross-focus group analysis was conducted to identify the common themes and categories from each group session. Finally, the transcriptions of the focus group interviews and the results of the sorting and categorizing process were audit checked by the assistant moderator and a committee member to assess the correspondence of unit coding with respect to the major themes and issues identified.

While theory plays an important role in data analysis, when and how it is used “depends on the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the extent to which theory has influenced the development of the research to that point” (1990, p. 113). Focus groups are often used when little information is available on a topic which has few predetermined theoretical underpinnings, as in this study. The data-analysis steps which have been provided “do not provide a specific role for theory until after all of the data analyses are conducted. Then, theory will be considered to assist in the interpretation of

the categories and findings” (1990, p. 113) presented in Chapter Five.

### Research Ethics

Aboriginal peoples have been objects of scientific research without voice as to the research topics explored, the research process employed, or the right to review the research data before the report was produced for far too long. While more Aboriginal people are currently entering universities and successfully completing their academic studies and many studies and reports have addressed Aboriginal education issues, the situation remains that nearly all have been created from the Eurocentric perspective, with the research being conducted by non-Native researchers. Further, for those Aboriginal students at the masters and doctorate levels of academic education, the challenge is to locate and employ research methodology which is culturally compatible with Aboriginal world views and traditions and which responds to the growing demand by Aboriginal people for responsible participation in the research process, while continuing to conform to the requirements of academic research methodology. It was with the intention of attending to these issues in addition to the ethical considerations outlined in the academic discourse that this study was designed. As Sieber (1992) points out, we study ethics to learn how to make social research “work” for all concerned. The ethical researcher creates a mutually respectful relationship in which people are pleased to participate openly and which the community at large regards as constructive (p. 3). Any deficiencies in the attempt to consider all the aforementioned issues in the construction of the research framework is due to the novice status of the researcher.

The decision to use the mini-focus group as the primary method of gathering data reflects the attempt to ensure some benefit to the participants by providing an opportunity for them to gather together and exchange ideas and experiences with other teachers whom they may not have the opportunity to work with once they leave the university setting. The small number of participants in each group allowed for a more in-depth discussion by each participant, which served the data gathering-process and simultaneously decreased the risk of a lapse in confidentiality due to the limited group numbers.

Confidentiality for the participants became another factor which required considerable thought. Because the focus group process is a discussion among participants, complete confidentiality could not be guaranteed by the researcher. All participants were asked to respect the confidentiality of the group sessions and participant contributions to the discussion were coded during transcription. Yet, the greater consideration was the maintenance of confidentiality when describing the participants and presenting the data in the thesis. While the North is a large land mass, the population is very small. While it is acknowledged that the provision of description of participant's individual backgrounds adds interest and clarity for the reader, description of individual participants was not included in the thesis to protect their anonymity within the small Northern population. Further, in discussion with participants, the decision was made to identify individual speakers by participant selected pseudonyms. Finally, the planned compatibility of the focus groups allowed for discussion to take place in an environment of acceptance and cultural understanding.

A letter of invitation (Appendix A) along with a voluntary consent form (Appendix B) was provided for each participant, outlining the research project and pertinent information regarding participation and withdrawal from the research project. During the research process, participant autonomy was protected with the right to withdraw from the project at any time without censure. In addition, each group participant was free to contribute as much or as little on each topic discussed during the focused interview as they were comfortable with. Further, the transcripts presented to participants for review had all participants' contributions coded, each individual receiving their own coding. While recognizing that there was a risk of a lapse of confidentiality when using the focus group approach, the procedure of coding the transcripts assisted in maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant's contribution to the group discussion. Finally, during the transcript review process, participants were asked to remove any portion of the transcript which they had contributed and did not wish to have quoted in the final thesis, thus preserving some autonomy through control over their input to the research data before the analysis was begun or the report produced.

The research topic, while chosen by the researcher and prompted by the necessity of completing a master's degree, is one which was derived from working within educational environments similar to those of the participants and observations which have been made over numerous years of experience. Furthermore, the focus group process allowed for the participants to control much of the discussion during the interview, addressing in depth the aspects of the research questions which had the most relevance to themselves and their work.



Formal debriefing style questions were written into the Moderator's Guide (Appendix C). But the debriefing was also a time when the researcher could informally visit with the participants and express appreciation for their contribution to the research. As well, it was an opportunity for the group participants to ask their own questions related to the research, and express their reactions to the process. Throughout the design of this research study, planning was focused upon respectfully acknowledging the right of persons to choose whether to participate in the study and for their well-being during the research process.

### Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized in five chapters. The first three chapters have been presented as follows. Chapter One provides the background to the research study, including a description of the study, research questions, the researcher's background and relationship to the study, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, and a definition of terms. The second chapter provides a review of the literature. The third chapter presents a literature review of the research methodology and the research process as it was carried out in this study. The fourth chapter contains the presentation of the focus group data. The format of Chapter Four reflects the classification of the data according to the major themes and issues derive from the focus group discussions. The data is presented in this organized manner with necessary clarification added by the researcher to enhance readers' understanding of the participants' contributions. Finally, the data were presented

in as close to transcript form as possible to facilitate the Aboriginal teachers' voices being heard in this thesis. Chapter Five provides the researcher's interpretation of the data, including references to the research literature where applicable and the reflections of the researcher regarding the focus group process, conclusions regarding the development of classroom learning environments, and the implications for further research which can be drawn from the results of this research study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE VOICE OF ABORIGINAL TEACHERS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this introduction is to explain the rationale for the method of presentation chosen for the data, to set the scene for the focus group discussions which took place during the data collection phase of the research project, and to introduce the research participants. The issue of voice, and whose voice is heard, is crucial when conducting research which explores the world views and experiences of Aboriginal peoples. A fundamental reason for undertaking this research was to expedite the voice of Northern Canadian Aboriginal teachers' representation in the academic literature related to Aboriginal education. The focus of this chapter on the presentation of the participants' perceptions of their classroom learning environments reflects the primary assumption that Northern Aboriginal teachers are valuable sources of information about themselves and their environment and that much can be learned from direct conversations with them, as their thoughts and opinions are intrinsic to the development of an understanding of the cultural negotiation processes inherent in Aboriginal education in the North.

The focus group methodology was used as the primary method for conducting the research because this approach facilitated Aboriginal participants' description of their

world and work in a manner with which they were comfortable. The data transcribed from the focus group sessions take the form of discussions which include recounting memories of childhood experiences, sharing of stories to illustrate participants' understanding of the dynamics of working with Aboriginal students within the context of the Euro-Canadian educational institution of the school. They also offer examples illustrating their perceptions of Non-Aboriginal teachers' attitudes and practice with descriptions of the physical aspects of their classroom environments to annotate some of their points about cultural negotiation within an institutional setting. The data have been categorized by topic to facilitate clarity for the reader who may not share a similar world view or experiences. Aside from the combining of participant contributions from two focus group sessions and the organization of the data into apparent categories, the data are presented in the conversational format of the transcripts. Words in brackets are added as clarification for the reader.

This method of presentation has been chosen as a means of negotiating the cultural orientations of both Native and non-Native audiences. The conversational presentation format attempts to leave the teaching in the hands of the Aboriginal teachers as they share their world, their experiences, and their work through their stories. Further, it is an attempt to incorporate the traditional practice allowing the "listener" to "hear" the stories, create personal meaning through internalization and reflection, and possibly return to "hear" the stories again, after time and experience have enabled new understandings to be drawn from the Aboriginal teachers' stories and perceptions. The researcher's voice will enter the narrative only to clarify the themes of the discussion.

Those individuals who journey from the North to southern colleges and universities are making a trip “outside” — outside the Aboriginal world of the North, outside the familiar environment of culture, place, family, and community. They enter a world with differing expectations, norms, and practices. Those who succeed in the academic institutions learn to function in terms dictated by the “outside” Euro-Canadian environment.

The Aboriginal teachers participating in the focus groups are from a generation in transition, carrying with them the world view and culture of previous generations into a technological world that is thrusting an increased pace of change through their communities. They originate from various tribal backgrounds: Cree, Deneshne (Chipewyan), Thucho (Dogrib), K’ashot’ine (Hareskin), and Dinjii Zhuh (Gwich’in), as well as Metis, Inuit, and Inuvialuit cultures. They range in age from twenty-three to thirty-six years old. They have experienced their traditional lifestyles in camps on the land and acquired an academic education at a southern university. They will return to live and work in various communities throughout the North. Yet, during their discussions, they brought forth common themes and experiences with regard to their childhood socialization and their work as teachers in their communities. Gunn-Allen (1992) explains the existence of common themes with observation that, “The wide diversity of tribal systems on the North American continent notwithstanding . . . tribal world-views are more similar to one another than any of them are to the patriarchal world view” (p. 6). As Ena, one of the participants explained, “Well, I do my work just like Tehmi, it’s just that it’s not Dene, it’s Inuit.” One of the challenges of conducting the focus groups with

the Northern Aboriginal teachers was locating a place which allowed, for a few hours, the recreation of the sense of “home” and safety of “place” where experiences and stories could be shared. After obtaining agreement from the participants as to the suitability of the place, we located ourselves in a small room in the education building which houses the Native Resource Centre, a room rarely frequented by non-Native students. Yet, it is a place where Aboriginal students frequently gather to complete assignments or study together. There, amid the library shelves filled with volumes of academic literature regarding Aboriginal people, gathered around a small table, participants settled into comfortably padded chairs and the focus group discussions ensued.

### Growing-up in Their Aboriginal World

During this portion of the focused discussions, the topics of conversation included the role of grandparents in the participants’ lives, their experiences with regard to learning processes, nurturing and discipline within their families and communities, and descriptions of their first contacts with the influences of the ‘outside’ world, the intruding world of the Euro-Canadian new-comers to the North.

### The Role of Grandparents

The following section, taken from the transcripts, presents the discussion of the importance of grandparents in the process of child rearing and socializing and in the adult lives of the Aboriginal teachers.

**Sas:** I guess if I start out from a personal level, when I was growing up when I had two parents, my grandparents were very active in raising us. My brother and I spent a lot of time with them. Actually, we lived with them for a number of years. I think we had freedom, we were able to explore, we didn't have restrictions. The restrictions that were taught to us, like night time going to bed, it was the time when everything rested, the sun was going down so we had to rest. That's how we were raised anyway, just quiet, exploring. Even when we were with our parents, we had a lot of freedom because my grandparents were very influential on my parents.

**Choh:** My grandparents had a big part in my life. If I was mad at my mom, or if we had an argument and I was mad, I'd just go to my grandmother and she was good and I could be there whenever I wanted to. Most of our summers were spent out on my grandmother's fish camp and you can walk there. You can go by boat or you can walk, and it's a beautiful walk. It's funny because nobody goes there anymore, but it was the most fun place. Our parents would all be in town working or whatever, but my grandmother and grandfather would be at the fish camp and all of us would be there. And you know, our parents would send us things like fruit and all that stuff and we'd share it with each other. We'd go picking berries with her, we'd help our uncle check the net, we were always out. We'd go back to town and smell like fish. *(All those gathered around the table laugh at this comment.)* But it was good and we spent time with all our cousins and we did lots of things. It was lots of fun, we had lots of freedom making decisions. Anything to me, basically.

**Ena:** As small as it was, the town was still too big for them [the parents] because they had all their life traveled around in the boat or whatever, so we, from age six to fourteen lived nine months out of the year at an outpost camp that was one hundred and three miles from the town, and then just coming in for the Christmas season up until spring. Then we would go back again. When I was in school, that's when I was in school, so they'd just put me in whatever grade I was supposed to be in *(laughter from the group interrupts her story)* according to my age and I never had any problems with that. When I was in school, when I think about it, there was no problems for me. The only thing I

really had to work on was learning how to write, because when I went into school all the kids were saying, "I know how to write." That was the one thing I couldn't do yet. My grandmother was probably the most influential person when I was growing up because she kept us most of the time. It wasn't, "Oh I have to keep you kids," type of thing. She was really quiet and did things in a really, I don't know, she was soft spoken and she didn't talk to us that much, but she did things that got your attention, the way she was. And she was mostly with my sisters and I, [it was us] that were with her.

**Tehmi:** At home, \_\_language\_\_ wasn't spoken hardly any at all because my dad was there. My grandmother, when she did come over it was kind of funny, it was like they kept their distance. But I know when my mom wasn't there and she couldn't make supper for everybody, or whatever, it was my grandmother that came and she did things. But she always cooked supper and then she said, "Tehmi here, go and give this to your dad." Then, before I got my house, I was living with my grandpa and he would set up camps along the roads, just for the weekend in the spring time and things like that.

**Tthe:** I think I'd have to say that my grandmother was a big influence in my life. She was the same way, very quiet, and kind, and gentle. I think sometimes I annoyed her. *(The group responds with laughter after hearing this observation.)*

Through the descriptions of their relationships with grandparents, the importance of the elder's function, as primary care-givers, role models, and educators during their childhood is apparent. The participants also spoke about the importance of the elders' encouragement and support in their adult lives.

**Tehmi:** A couple of the elders at home have asked me how come they don't see me around much anymore and I tell them I am going to school. They say, "Oh, that's good."

**Ena:** When Tehmi was talking about elders, I was thinking about when I was going to



school in \_\_town\_\_, I thought the people that were going to be supporting me were my friends. The people my own age. When I left after the first semester and I was going home for Christmas, I found that wasn't so and throughout going to Arctic College and coming to the university here, I find that the elders are the ones who are the most supportive. Who say, "Our life style can't be the way it was a few years ago, we have to move along. It's nice to see that there is people your age who are willing to go and leave and try and find the best in both."

### Nurturing, Discipline, Restrictions and Responsibilities

All societies provide the means whereby children are raised to become responsible, contributing members of the group. Inherent in this socialization process are the cultural practices of nurturing and discipline within the society, the enforcement of restrictions during childhood, and the acceptance of responsibilities as the child matures. The following presents the Aboriginal teachers' stories and observations with regard to their experiences. The presentation begins with the discussion pertaining to practices of nurturing and discipline.

**Ena:** I have this one story. During the summer my grandmother would always take us out on walks and I was very impatient when my sister, before me, she was always really slow. We'd take walks every day and we sat on this rock to take a rest and my grandmother wouldn't hit me or scold me if I did something bad, and so after we rested we were continuing our walk. But my sister was still sitting on the rock. I was telling her, "Come on, you know grannie is waiting for us." But she was sitting there, so what I did was / my mother had us wear the same style jackets but in different colors and they had hoods / I grabbed my sister by the hood and I dragged her to where my grandmother was standing and waiting for us. My grandmother didn't say anything, she just kept on

walking, because she knew that once we got back to camp my sister was going to tell my mom and my mom was going to give it to me. *(Laughter from the group as Ena finishes her story.)*

**Sas:** . . . if we took off from our grandparents' house and went down by the water where we weren't supposed to my grannie used to chase us with a willow. We'd run home, we'd sit on my pappa's lap and tell him how much we loved him . . . *(Group laughter)*. . . As long as you beat grannie home, you were safe. I don't recall my grannie ever hitting us with it, but you know, it was the threat. . .

**Dlua:** Yeah, it was always just the threat.

*(General nods of assent and murmurs of agreement follow this statement.)*

**Sas:** Just the idea that it's going to happen. But it was like I think we scared the pants off her, well she didn't wear pants . . . *(Group laughter)* . . . but I think we scared the life out of her because we were out on logs in the lake, aye. "AH, there's grannie, get to shore!" *(More laughter around the table as the story is concluded.)*

**R/M:** (PROBE) What would have happened if your grandmother wouldn't have noticed you out on the logs?

**Sas:** You mean if she wasn't there what would have happened? You mean would someone else take her role or try to discipline us or make sure we made the right choice?

**R/M:**(COMMENT) Yeah.

**Sas:** I think there was always people like that in my life, especially when I was with my grandparents in that life. It was all their friends took care of us, too. We were always down by the lake and they would be working on their boats and stuff and they'd say, "Your grannie is going to be mad. . ." *(Laughter and agreement with heads nodding around the group.)*

**Dlua:** Or in my case the extended family would step in if my parents weren't there, an aunt or an uncle or even an older cousin. They would say, "Don't go there," or "You shouldn't be playing there."

**Ena:** Growing up with my grandmother, she didn't do a lot of the disciplining. Being around her, I don't think I did that many bad things. It was when I was with my parents,

they were always so busy and all of us kids were like all there, wanting this and wanting that, and if you wanted to be heard, you did something.

**Choh:** Sometimes the disciplining we got, me and my sister, we were the two youngest, got disciplined from my three older brothers, you know. And they would say, “Why do you do things like that?” or “Why are you . . . ?” that was kind of a discipline thing because in a way they were the authority.

**Sas:** My brothers were protective, too. They used to make sure I was home by 10:00 o’clock. I was eighteen years old and my brothers were all younger than me. They would take me home and then go out. (Everyone laughs at that)

**Dlua:** It was funny like that. Even though they were younger than you they would protect you, make sure you were home before them. They know you are home safe and then they go out and rampage the town.

**Ena:** My brothers are all the older ones and the boys in my family were given so much more freedom than the girls were.

**Dlua:** They were more strict with the girls than they were with the boys. Like if my brother did what I did, he got away, but I didn’t get away. It was OK for him to make mistakes, but it wasn’t OK for me to make mistakes.

**Lani:** I wasn’t allowed to run around all over town. I couldn’t go past this place because that was up-town and that’s not a place to play. I had restrictions.

**Dlua:** We had some similar restrictions, we weren’t allowed to pass a certain area. We can play around the house area or our neighbors, just as long as our mom can see us. If we go out of her sight—like we’re not allowed to. ←

**Choh:** Like, my mom never told us to be in by such and such a time, but we were always in, none of us were out past 10:00 o’clock.

**Lani:** I’m very glad for my discipline now. That’s the way I do with my kids.

**Sas:** Did they ever use scarey stories?

**Dlua:** Yeah, bushman . . . it’s the major one. Yeah, we used to get scarey stories to keep us away from things, you know? I’m sure I knew they made them up too. (*Laughter around the table.*) It didn’t matter, eh. No it didn’t. As you got away from the

community and the setting and got to experience the outside world, when you came back and heard the bushman stories then you think, my god, did I really believe that? (Everyone laughs at this comment, all in general agreement, heads nodding assent) You know. Strange, once you get away and experience the outside world and you're not in this little world they build around you . . .

The discussion changes focus as Dlua begins speaking, the theme of the discussion becomes the process of acquiring responsibilities within the family unit and community.

**Dlua:** In the smaller world where everybody is looking out for you, you get a chance to look out for yourself whenever you want to. And then you have a responsibility to help look out for the rest and the little ones, where in the bigger world you're all alone, you have to fend for yourself.

**Choh:** Well, we had things to do, too. As we were older, someone had to do the dishes, sweep the floor, take the garbage, everybody had something to do, and I think they [the boys] weren't left out of it . . . they did all the things, too; they went hunting and they still do those things. But they weren't treated any differently, in a sense they weren't. I mean, they had to take care of the little kids too because they were the older ones, even though they weren't told to. You know, if we were doing something we shouldn't or went somewhere we shouldn't then they were always there to say, "Come back." So in a way, they were taking care of us, you know, kind of really protective.

**Lani:** My brother never had to do dishes or sweep the floor, but he took the garbage out and was helping my dad, if my dad needed the stairs swept or outside things done outside. That was his. But there was only one boy, so, baby boy forever . . . (*General laughter greets this observation.*)

**Dlua:** By the time I was about nine or so, eight or nine, we were responsible to do some other household chores because all my older sisters were away at school and there was

just my mom and us so we were responsible for doing the dishes, sweeping the floor, washing the floor if needed, but that was a big job, so if we wanted to we can, but we don't have to. But mainly just dishes and sweeping the floors and taking care of the young ones, brothers and sisters, I have two younger brothers.

**Ena:** Being the youngest, I come from a big family there's eight of us, and being the youngest I wasn't given much responsibility. I can remember when I was a kid that I wasn't given as much responsibility as the others were and my sisters made sure that I was really clear about that. *(This comment was greeted with laughter by the group gathered around the table.)*

**Lani:** I am the second oldest in my family. My sister and I [did chores] for a long time, and then when \_name\_ and \_name\_ became like nine or ten then they started helping too, then there was the four of us.

**Choh:** I think it starts out with little tiny jobs that are really easy and actually fun to do and then it gets bigger and bigger and then soon you are looking after your little brothers and sisters or your cousins and that doesn't end I don't think.

**Dlua:** It doesn't ever end.

**Choh:** You still do it. *(General laughter and agreement shared among the group.)*

**Dlua:** But they don't leave the small siblings for hours and hours, like there is supervision where we watch them but my mom is there to watch us.

**Choh:** Yeah, it's like that.

**Sas:** When we were young, I never did any [chores] at home, we didn't have to. We did dishes if we wanted to, you know. Or make your beds, make your mom happy, or you know accomplish something, but . . .

**Choh:** It's not something you were actually *told to do*.

**Sas:** No, never *told to do it*. I think that's how people discipline, you know. I caught myself doing that with my youngest son the other day. He did something and his older brother was there and I told his older brother, "That's not the way you do it. That is not the way you behave." But it was my youngest son's behavior that I was directing my comment at when I spoke to his older brother. But it was because \_\_name\_\_ was older,

he knows better, and he influences his younger brother so its up to him to show a good example. And \_\_name\_\_ knew that it was for him.

**Dlua:** Yeah, it's kind of embedded and I tend to do that with my own children.

**Sas:** As soon as they get older, it stops. You direct all those things differently at different ages.

### The Learning Process

During the discussion about the learning process experienced by the participants, topics ranged from motivating children's learning and trusting the child to learn when ready, to traditional teaching practices including tag-along teaching, modeling, observation, and backwards chaining. Through out, their stories were punctuated with laughter as they recalled their learning experiences within the family and community.

**Choh:** The learning is really basically observing. Learning to cut fish, you know, skin rabbits, you just sit there. They don't say, "Hey you, sit down beside me, you're going to learn to skin a rabbit whether you like it or not." You actually want to, you know, you want to learn how to cut a fish, and learn how to do those things.

**Sas:** They almost enticed you to be interested.

**Choh:** Yeah . . .

**Dlua:** Yes.

**Lani:** I remember that.

**Choh:** I mean, what all do you do, you run around and play and then you see someone cutting fish and then you watch, and if you watch it over and over again, then you know first she's gonna cut the head off, or scale it and cut the head off, so you know, and then, by the time its your turn, she's there to help you if you need it.

**Lani:** Um hmm . . .

**Choh:** It's really observing and she has a lot of patience, that's what it takes, a lot of patience.

**Sas:** And then even if you try, and make a mistake, they don't discipline you for your mistakes, and your mistake is part of your learning. *(Again, general agreement is signaled from all group members through nodding of heads and murmured assent.)*

**Choh:** It's all fun.

**Sas:** I think learning is fun, like they made it. That's what enticed you to observe the first time because there was lots of laughter involved in their task, it was fun for them.

**Dlua:** They didn't make it a job, although it was something that had to be done. You kind of had laughter and laughter is the key to making hard work good.

**Lani:** If you feel good, then you'll learn a lot better and a lot easier.

**Sas:** But when you played house, too, or you took on that role in the play, that's when your grandmother would sort of teach you, become part of it and teach you to sew or do different things.

The conversation shifts from focusing on learning as a small child which involved the learning process as part of their play to learning more sophisticated skills like making moccasins, and their memories of acquiring the skills required to complete one of the clothing-preparation tasks.

**Dlua:** My first moccasins I made for my daughter when she was a baby. My mother-in-law cut out the pattern for me and she said, "Well here, put it together." And so I tried and it looked like it got shrunk . . . *(laughter)* and wrinkled, aye, and it looks really bad, and she said, "Well, it looks OK for your first time." But I knew it wasn't, right so I undid it again and the second time I tried it looked a little better. But I was frustrated by then, so I didn't do it a third time. But somewhere, we still have it lying around, and she would tell me about it once in awhile and laugh. *(Everyone laughs.)* We'd have a good laugh

about it. those kind of tasks, they were never pushed and I wasn't really forced to do it. Just the beading part, . . . not really forced, because my mom made it look so really simple and fun to do. So we kinda always wanted to sew with her in that way. But big projects I didn't really get to make or do. I don't know if they don't really want you to ruin their hides. That's what I think. Even though, there's little scraps.

**Choh:** My mom was really different, I had to do everything right from the beginning. She'd do the patterns though, so I would know where to put the beads and everything, but everything else I had to do. Then I'd get mad and say, "I can't do it right" and she'd say, "You gotta keep doing it. The more you do it the better it gets." Everybody does that you know, mine was really bad, same thing. But you should see my first beading. . . Oh, it was horrendous, but she's still got it laying around. But she was right . . . I said, "Well, I guess I better keep doing it," and I did. I got better and better at it.

**Dlua:** Its just like my mom, she'll start the outside and we'll fill up the inside. When our beading gets a little better, we get to do our own.

**Choh:** I don't think I've ever felt like I've failed anything, even if I failed something, because I knew, like if I failed a course in high school, and I've done that a few times, and you know, my Mom wouldn't make a big deal out of it. She wouldn't go huffing and puffing, making me feel bad about it. You know, it was just the way it was and you know sometimes you have to fail things, sometimes you are not going to do as well as you want, you're better at other things. And I didn't ever feel like I was a failure. No matter what I did, no matter how badly I did or how well I did, she was always going to love everyone of us, and she does.

The learning was also described as part of a natural process of growing up within the environment, so much so that even acquiring bilingual skills was perceived as “just happening”.

**Tehmi:** I don't know where I learned my \_\_name\_\_ language, it has to have been from



the kids that I was going to school with . . . I still remember this one boy who was a few years older than me, grade nine or something, and I was in maybe grade five or four, and they were talking \_\_language\_\_ to one another. They were saying, "She knows how to speak \_\_language\_\_" and stuff like that. I didn't say anything, I was just standing there and listening. Then the boy said, "Ask her something in \_\_language\_\_." He asked me something, but I answered him in English and then he said, "You see, she knows it otherwise how would she understand," because I did answer him. So I don't know where I learned my language. All I remember is my mother said when I was younger Father \_\_name\_\_, he said that I would be an interpreter. I don't know if it somehow came from there, I have no idea. In my family, I am, out of the four of us, the one that is the most fluent. My brother will understand but he won't speak. My sister, she is really trying hard and \_\_name\_\_ understands as well as the two boys.

### Contacts With the Outside World

Participants' contacts with the influences of the world outside their Northern communities varied. Some moved to larger communities where the presence of non-Aboriginal people was more dominant, others recognized the influences of residential schools upon their parent's generation, while often parents' occupations were significant factors in introducing change into the traditional life styles. The following section presents their observations and experiences of factors influencing change, residential schools, personal experiences, and perceptions of cultural negotiation.

The conversational excerpts begin with the years of growing up, the participants describing time scheduled to accommodate 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. work hours of a parent.

**Lani:** I must be the odd one, I'm just the opposite. We had responsibilities, we had to set the table, clear the table, sweep the floor. In the house, I think before my dad came home at five, we had to be in and ready for supper when he came in . . . we had certain times meals were and that's when they were and you had to be home. But I mean, breakfast was when we got up to go to school, dinner was at 12:00, my dad got off work at 5:00, so shortly after 5:00 we had to be in. That was in town, now then you go to the bush it's completely different (*laughter and nods of comprehension among the group*). You eat when you're hungry. You don't work around somebody's time.

**Dlua:** Our house was like Lani's where we had meals in the morning, lunch, because my dad worked. He worked as the school custodian. So our meals were planned around what he does, and most of our activity planned around whether he was free or not.

**Ena:** In my own family, my dad was always being out on the land. He still is and my mother was the one who was working and my dad did work as well, but he just could not work inside. He had to be outside all the time.

**Tehmi:** Growing up for me was nothing like Choh's experience because my dad is \_\_ethnic identity\_\_ and my mom is Metis. If I think back and compare it, I guess, I could say I was brought up, I don't know, white man's way kind of like, I guess. . . My dad did go caribou hunting . . . when he wanted to go and stuff but it was not a family thing. The guys were always hunting. Spring hunting . . . and they were really good at it. I guess what I am saying is that I feel that I've missed out and so I feel that I am always trying to catch up kind of thing.

Comments about the effects of residential school experiences were made with regard to parent's discipline methods and personal experiences.

**Dlua:** I think our parents kind of got influenced by missionary schools. Cause a lot of them went through the system, the missionary schools. My parents went till they were

about grade three or four to school. [About discipline] Yeah, we got things like that. Mostly we got whacked with a willow or something and I think that came from the influence they got from the missionaries. They got beaten and abused by them so they, that's the only way, their way of disciplining, that's the only way they knew of discipline. So, therefore, it kind of carried on like that.

**Choh:** I noticed you become like cattle, we were all herded down for breakfast, herded back, herded around for chores and then herded off to school.

**Sas:** I also think that my responsibilities in the home came from being in residential school, learning the tasks there.

Then, the discussion shifts to personal experiences with the world outside the North or home communities, the world of academic education and work.

**Tthe:** Originally my family is from \_\_place name\_\_. We slowly moved down with my step-dad looking for work. We all settled in \_\_place name\_\_, so that's where I got my education. We moved from \_\_place name\_\_ to \_\_place name\_\_ when I was in Grade Three and it was a whole big change, a big change. We moved and it was very different . . . I thought, "I don't think I'm going to like this very much," and that's pretty well the way it was. . .

**Dlua:** In the smaller world where everybody is looking out for you and you get a chance to look out for yourself whenever you want to. And then you have a responsibility to help look out for the rest and the little ones. And where in the bigger world you're all alone, you have to fend for yourself.

**Choh:** Everything is individualistic, and cold almost. It's colder. (*Agreement from others in the group*) You have to look out for yourself. It's totally different.

**Tthe:** I saw the advertisement and then I applied and I got the job and one of the things was that I had to get my certificate. I enjoyed it, but actually I wasn't too crazy about working in the school and getting a certificate in the beginning because that was just a

whole different world and people I really didn't like, had nothing in common with.

**Ena:** The one thing I find, I don't know if this is right for me to say, but when I came to Saskatoon, and I was meeting more people, I lived in residence and I was the only Native at that time last year, the only Native student in the women's residence . . . It was hard adjusting at first because there is all the stereotypes about Native people and all these poor little white girls believed them.

### Summary

The discussion of their early years focused on the influence of the elders, parents, families, and communities and their place in the familiar interconnected world of their childhood. First contacts with the world "outside" were indirect, having families begin to schedule days according to the hours of a parent's employment or the effects of parent's being educated in residential schools. Then, as participants grew older and moved farther from their communities, their reminiscences of their own academic education clearly indicate personal knowledge of experiencing the effect of the dominant Euro-Canadian culture of the "outside" world.

### **Their Work As Aboriginal Teachers**

The role of the moderator/researcher through out the focus group discussions was to raise questions relevant to the research being undertaken. The second topic for discussion was the participants' work as teachers. The discussion which follows has been organized into two major categories reflecting the themes which emerged during this phase of the focused discussions, building respectful relationships and creating a "home" where learning takes place. Sub-headings are added to facilitate clarity for the reader.

## Building Respectful Relationships

Throughout the discussion regarding teaching, the primary focus of the teachers' conversation was the development of relationships with community and students. The teacher's role in the construction of student/teacher relationships through practicing flexibility, sharing decision making, respecting the individuality of the students and their situations, and accommodating facilitating the appropriate conduct of their students are themes that appear during their discussions.

### With Community

During the discussion about building community relationships, participants explored subjects related to being from the community they were working in and moving into a new community and establishing relationships.

**Sas:** I think your best partner, moving into a little community is a little child who likes old people (*Everyone laughs*) . . . I was thinking about my youngest son, he used to run every day, about the same time, down the road to the Co-op and sit on the steps with the old men and try to share his Cheezies. He'd just move over to the closest one and ask, "What 'cha doing, pappa?" They'd just move over cause they didn't know who he was. Then he'd just move closer, the two of them sliding across the porch step, "You want some, pappa?" and he'd hold out his Cheezies. Or chasing Old Annie around the store calling out, "What 'cha doing grannie, you gonna shop, . . . what 'cha gonna buy, hey grannie?" . . . (*Much laughter circulated the table as this story continued.*) Then, someone comes around and says, "Who's this little white boy?" It's funny, but every day he did that. Then we'd go to the Band Office for coffee every day, it's your best tie to the community, a small child.

**Dlua:** Well, the kids that I worked with, because I am married into the family and I have connections to some of the students, I'm their aunt I guess more or less, and so they have more respect and they tend to listen and tend to do what you'd like them to do. Where as if this or that particular child, if he was with another teacher that is not from the community, or has no connections with people from the community, they tend not to listen to them. They'll do everything that they would in their powers to make their life miserable. *(Chuckles and nods circulate around the table.)* If you have connections to the community, or if you are a family member, then things look different, they are a lot different, they tend to respect you more. They don't treat you like they treat everybody else, they tend to look up to you. But, in return, you have to treat them like an individual.

**Sas:** At the time that I taught in \_\_place name\_\_ I didn't have any family connections but I think that the students I worked with liked me and had respect for me. But they were allowed in my home, they could come for dinner, they could come any time and their parents came, anytime. It was kind of like an open-door policy, they could come any time and no one would be left out. That's how we became involved in the community, by letting them come and then we would go out.

**DI:** It's true, even a non-Native that goes in a Native community, if they get involved in the community willingly and that, then they are very well respected.

**Dlua:** Go out in the community, then get to meet everybody else, so that way if one of your students sees you out there in the community visiting a house where they , maybe it's their aunt or their uncle's or even their friend's, you visiting there, they see you there, "Hey, she's like one of us. She's not trying to be isolated from us."

**Sas:** I think that just shows the community you have respect for them too. Like for the parents or whatever is happening out there . . . you're willing to be flexible within this other environment.

**Dlua:** You kind of plan around what the community is doing. Yeah, even the old people, they tend to see you around and, if they know you understand a Dene language, then they'll be just happily yapping away to you, sometimes even if you don't understand then you just nod and acknowledge them and you're fine. Smile.

### With Students

**Choh:** You say “Good morning,” you talk to them, and so on and so forth. You spend a little time with each child. You try to respect them.

**Lani:** You acknowledge them. You always acknowledge them.

**Sas:** The first-name basis made a difference with kids, too. They called me by my first name.

**Ena:** Me too.

**Dlua:** Yeah, me too. I never liked to be addressed as “Mrs.” or “Ms.” That was like an official figure. Where as if you went by your first name basis, you would be more like them. They didn’t have to look up to you.

**Lani:** If the kids called me Mrs. \_\_name\_\_, it was just like a joke and they’d giggle about it. (*Laughter and general agreement* ).

**Ena:** It’s also good for the students to see you outside of class as well because they see you are a human being. (*General laughter*) When I’m home and I’m teaching, I find that when I am where ever, running around, or at the arena, or at the store or whatever, you see your students all the time. I noticed that when they see someone around the community, they won’t tell you in class in front of the other students, but they will tell you when you see them on their own. They’ll say, “I really like what we did in class today,” or “I didn’t like what we did.” You get feedback.

**Sas:** When you first start in a school, too, the little ones, right away they want to call you “Auntie.” And you just let them alone, aye. They call you “Auntie” all year. Then they try to figure out how you could possibly be related to them and fit into their little scheme. But they want to be a connection to you, it’s a relationship. They call you “Auntie” right away and you’ll take care of them.

**Dlua:** Caring is a big key, too. If you show you care, then they show you respect.

**Ena:** It doesn’t matter, from the good to the worst, or what ever they [non-Aboriginal administrators or teachers] think the worst is. If they respect you, then they will let you carry on, there won’t be any trouble and then you can carry on.

### The Teacher's Role and Sharing Decision Making

The participants also discussed their perceptions of a teacher's position as a role model for their students and the importance of shared decision-making, which is integral to creating an environment based upon mutual respect.

**Ena:** Being a teacher in a small community, the kids are going to look up to you and you really have to think what's important and what's not important. You're a role model and, you know.

**Tthe:** Whether you like it or not?

**Ena:** Yeah.

**Tehmi:** When I'm trying to teach my students, I am also trying to teach myself. So I think, in a way that's good because, if I'm interested, then I'm going to try and get as much out of it as I can, and in turn, my students will be learning at the same time too.

**Dlua:** The decisions for the class, too. The decisions should be made as a whole rather than you as a teacher. Some classroom decisions should be made with everybody's input. That way they're not left out, they're not by themselves, or you're not being the controller. They have some control. You share the decision-making.

**Sas:** Shared responsibilities and mutual respect for their decisions or ability to make decisions. Acknowledging that they are capable and can do something. Do whatever they want to do.

**Dlua:** It's kind of like being the leader of the group.

**Lani:** Still a leader but not directly.

**Sas:** A facilitator and a leader, but not someone who has power over someone else. Power over someone else is not so nice, is it.

The benefit of being flexible with regard to scheduled time and work is illustrated in the following story. The teacher's respect for the boy's desire to share his rabbit enabled the



integration of community and formal education experiences. The discussion which follows continues the theme of respect for students.

**Tehmi:** One time when we were working on spring themes, setting rabbit snares and all kinds of stuff like that, one of my students, we were making the snares using snare wire, he just couldn't wait. \_\_name\_\_ just couldn't wait to set the snare. So, he made a couple of them himself, and I guess he had them in his desk and at recess time he took it and he set the snares himself, outside. Then the next day, recess time, he came back with this rabbit. *(laughter around the group)* He just couldn't wait for all of us to go out together. He came back with this rabbit, so I thought, well, what are we going to do? You know? And then I remembered that when I was in the community teacher education program, \_\_name\_\_ said, "Just because you have a plan book doesn't mean you follow it every day, things are going to come up." So I thought, well what are we going to do. So I asked \_\_name\_\_, who was working with me, he was kind of like the cultural person, a young guy, so I asked him if he'll show us how to skin the rabbit. We talked about it and discussed it in class and said that this is what we are going to do. And then we went and that's what we did. We made a fire in the tent outside the school and we cooked it. We all had rabbit meat too. Because it was springtime, it wasn't very good and there was lice and stuff like that on there, but it was a really good experience. It was really fun.

**Choh:** I think also [students] getting into a classroom where they feel good, and they want to go there every day, then they are going to do what's required of them.

**Tehmi:** I think, if you respect them, then they'll return that favor and you have to accept them for who they are and look at where they are coming from. Like \_\_name\_\_ for example, his home life is getting better, but the year before it was a little rough, and things like that.

**Tthe:** Some kids you have to be more flexible. Some days, you could get them to work and other days you really can't. If you try to force them to do what you want, you'll probably be sending them to the office.

**Tehmi:** When I'm teaching the students in the class, I try to think about how it is for them and not my way, or imposing my way onto them. I think they learn from what they are most accustomed to instead of imposing your ways.

### Regarding discipline

Respect for and knowledge of their students were apparent themes when teachers related stories about how they dealt with the disciplining of individual students, using a combination of humor and allowing students to maintain responsibility for and control over their actions.

**Sas:** I think as soon as you label the child, that there's something wrong, then you're going to have problems right there. And labeling now is so easy to do. I think I had a naughty child in my classroom . . . (*Much general laughter.*) Everyone thought he was bad, but he was just naughty you know, mischievous, got into stuff. He did some pretty horrible stuff. He cut somebody's shirt and hair, you know. I think he liked her. (*More laughter.*) He didn't know how to tell her that or show her. I used to tell him, "Just go sit beside her. Color with her over there. You don't have to cut her shirt or her hair." But you know, as time passed he got better and he was less naughty and he became good. I remember, he used to go home when he got naughty. He'd have to take a break, so he'd go home and then he'd come back after recess. He'd last a little while, then he'd have to go home again and come back after lunch. And one day he stayed all day and he said, "Sas, I was here all day!" (*Laughter around the table.*) "Good for you!" We had a little celebration and I didn't even know he was there all day. He was so good, just all day long. He surprised himself, "I was really here all day!"

**Lani:** We also need to mention one thing though —ignoring the behavior— at least, trying to ignore the behavior.

**Choh:** That's the hard part.

**Sas:** I was thinking about how at \_\_school name\_\_ we had this one student who was huge. Oh man, he was twelve years old and he weighed about two hundred and thirty pounds. He'd get mad and he'd throw himself on the floor and he'd have a little tantrum, aye. And we were going to the gym one day and he had to finish up something and then he could come. He got mad, threw himself on the floor, kicking and screaming at us, calling us whatever he wanted to. And he used to call \_\_classroom assistant's name\_\_ "you big fat thing," he used to call her fat for some reason, aye, but if you turned her sideways you'd miss her, you know. She was so skinny.

"You big fat thing, you," he cried and \_\_classroom assistant\_\_ just said, "Hey, take a look at me," she'd turn sideways and just disappear. (*Laughter erupts around the assembled group.*) But anyway, he's on the floor and he's having a fit and I just said, "I don't know why you did that, but I'm not going to help you up today." I used to help him up and get him off the floor. The desks were far away this time and I said, "Now you have to roll over to one of those chairs and get yourself up . . . finish your task . . . and meet us in the gym. . . see you later." He couldn't hurt himself there, so we just left him. He was there in about three seconds. (*Group laughter.*) I didn't say he couldn't come though, he had the choice, you know. Finish up and come or . . .

**Lani:** If [the difficult behavior] continues though, and if you put it related to their personal self, and how somebody personal to them would feel if this was done, then that really cures it fast.

### Summary

Caring, acceptance, respect, and humor are discernible in the discussions and stories of the Aboriginal teachers as they talk about their work in terms of building respectful relationships with communities and their students. Paramount to the discussion is the necessity for an environment characterized by unconditional respect for the individual, regardless of age or situation.

## Creating a Home Where Learning Takes Place

The environment of the classroom consists of the combination of the nature of interaction between people, the physical environment surrounding the people, and an ongoing monitoring of the need for change, or the ability to identify indicators of success. The following discussions illuminate the approach of the Aboriginal teachers with regard to these three aspects of classroom environment.

### Accepting the Whole Child - Meeting Needs

The teachers discuss their acceptance of the priority of attending to the primary needs of the child, the need for flexibility of planning with regard to community activities, and their perceptions regarding promotion of student cooperation and responsibility for learning.

**Sas:** We used to have times when kids would come to school and sleep, (*General acknowledgment around the table of having that experience.*) they were so tired. And it's just best to leave them. They'd curl up in the corner or some place with their book or a cushion and that's it. Then everyone was quiet, you know. That's the funny part, and the other students just left them, too. Let them sleep, and they're quiet and busy doing their own little thing.

**Ena:** It's true, at carnivals and whatever, the kids are up late. They come to school and you were probably there with them (*Laughter among the group.*) so you plan and you know that the kids are going to be tired. So let's not have a test today, or whatever. But there's some things that occur and even if it is just one student or one family, it affects the whole class. If one student had parents who were drinking the night before, and he comes to class, no breakfast, no sleep, no nothing and so what he does is he has a hard day, and

he makes sure that every body knows about it, all the students, and especially you, the teacher. When I was teaching the grade one kids, there was a grade one girl who, after the Tuesday plane came in, would have had a bad night at home. You knew she was going to come to school any ways, even though she wouldn't have slept or anything she would still come. The poor thing was only in grade one. After awhile, the kids noticed the pattern and they would do whatever they had to do to make \_\_name\_\_'s day easier. I didn't have to tell them to. They would give her their recess snack or some of them would even tell her to go to sleep on the reading-center cushions.

**Tehmi:** . . . what I notice is, if you walk through the school principal's office on days after bingo night, there's always more kids in there, always. And when I go round talking to teachers at the end of the day, the days after bingo nights or things like that, those days are always the worst.

**M/R: PROBE** - Do you find on those kinds of days that you have to send more kids to the office?

**Tehmi:** I think at the beginning maybe I did, but you have to think of ways, you can't just keep sending them to the office. You still have to try to teach them. You have to think of other ways to go instead of always using the office or negative discipline things. Maybe on those days, you have to plan more activities or shorter activities, but more. Different ways of getting around it so that you are keeping their attention and interest and they are still following you and not falling asleep, fighting or whatever it is that they are doing.

**Sas:** . . . you could tell when they were having a hard time at home, you try to understand and you try to make their life a little easier in the school. You're so "happy they made it." You know it was a rough evening (*Group acknowledges the situation and voices agreement*).

**Dlua:** Even though inside you're going, OOOh.

**Sas:** Exactly.

**Dlua:** You never know if they will blow up.

**Lani:** Yeah.

**Choh:** Um hmm.

**Sas:** I would say, “Oh gee, you going home for lunch? How would you like to come home with me for lunch today?” and take them home. It’s always a treat for them, you know.

**Tehmi:** What I did one year, \_\_name\_\_ and I, we bought cases of bread and we gave kids toast in the morning. It didn’t take long to make it and the ones who came in early loved to make it for everybody else. And then we got the money from the dances and stuff like that, that the school was putting on and \_\_name\_\_ [the principal] saw that the kids were coming in the mornings and they were coming on time. You’re giving them something to eat and there’s nothing bad in it and it doesn’t take long. So he supported it and it worked really well. In the afternoons, we gave bread sticks or Ritz crackers in case the kids didn’t have any lunch. The kids really liked that too, and it helped them to come in on time, too.

**Ena:** And when you do things like that with kids, they just feel so much more like they are working together and this is for all of us. And they’re proud of that and they want to continue and they want to come.

**Tthe:** That was something I had a real hard time with, especially when being classroom assistant, I didn’t have full control. Having to deal with the kids that are tired and some who are really hungry . . . like how are you supposed to make them work when they are thinking about food and they’re tired? I’d tell the teacher, well, just let them sleep for an hour or give them a snack, bread and peanut butter, like. Give them a little bit of rest. They’d say, “No, you can’t do that. If you start doing it for one, you’ll have to do it for all of them. We’re not running a home, this is supposed to be school, and they come here to learn.” But, you know, their basic needs are not being met. I find that I had a really hard time one year with that. And there’s always kids you are going to have concerns about when you go home. Like, “Oh no, the weekend’s coming up and everybody’s getting paid,” you know. I don’t know, I just can not stop and leave and say, “Oh well, I’ll deal with it on Monday when these little guys come in.” It is always something I think about over the weekend.

### Cooperation and Responsibility

The promotion of cooperation and responsibility was evident in the discussion of how teachers grouped students for learning and their observations regarding student interaction.

**Lani:** I like having mine in groups. They help each other

**Sas:** I liked mine in groups, too. They help each other.

**Lani:** It didn't matter if they talked and chatted to each other, they were helping each other.

**Sas:** Exactly, there was learning happening.

**Choh:** Well, also what they would do is they would ask the kids at the table they were sitting at for help, instead of disturbing the teacher. And there would always be someone there who knew . . . You have stronger ones with the weaker ones.

**Tthe:** And they seem to be all on the same wave-length. Like you read some of their work or something. I'll give this example. This little boy wrote a story about jumping out and scaring his brother. I read it and it was OK, but I didn't laugh or anything. Then he took his story around to share. He went around and read it to some kids and they laughed and laughed and laughed. It's like, I don't get it. But then he'd go to another group of kids and he'd read it and they'd all laugh and laugh. They definitely have their own little way of thinking.

**Tehmi:** Um hmm, perception.

**Tthe:** Yeah.

**Ena:** And when you do things like that with kids, they just feel so much more like they can be working together and they're proud and want to go on.

### Classroom Set-up

Further, the discussion regarding the physical arrangement of their classrooms

also includes attending to the whole child, the environment being constructed to meet his/her perceived needs.

**Tehmi:** At the beginning of the year when I am setting up my classroom, I try to set it up like a home environment. Maybe having a livingroom, things like couches or cushions or whatever, things that make it homey for the students. Things that make it comfortable. Also, instead of just putting up string to hang things from, I asked the janitors if they could put up sticks, like you see in the homes. They hang drymeat on those sticks. So I had six of them in the classroom and I hang their work from that. Their art work and stuff like that, because those things we see in their homes anyway.

**Sas:** I think, too, when I set up my classroom I thought about what I wanted the kids to accomplish and not put too much out for them. If there was too much, then it just got kind of wild. They're too busy. They were trying to figure out different kinds of stuff and you'd have ten kids with one area trying to figure out all these different things and they never got anywhere. So we put out a few things and then we graduated to more. And it's important that the walls are not too busy. I found too much stuff made it too busy. I started out with lots of stuff thinking that it would make it colorful and appealing to them, but it was just too much. It was crazy. I just about drove myself nuts. It was my fault. *(Everyone shares the laughter.)*

**Dlua:** What I found works, too, is I put just a few things up. Then I leave a lot of space open, and as we do stuff, work, we just put them on the wall. They get to put it on the wall, display their work when they did it. Then by the end of the year, the walls are all filled; sometimes we have to tear down some stuff and put other stuff up. They work that way, if you don't make it too appealing, because they tend to be staring a lot and not concentrating.

**Choh:** You know what I liked? Some teachers—usually the Native teachers—when you went to their classroom, there's things in the classroom that are in your home— like pieces of fur lying around, beads, and always something to eat, bannock and tea.



Sometimes, they would even cook meat. You feel good there and you don't want to go.

**Tehmi:** Another thing I saw \_\_teacher's name\_\_ do in her class, she had a fishnet on the ceiling and she used it for decoration and also to hold objects in, like light weight objects that the kids made, or anything like that.

**Dlua:** Bringing your home atmosphere into the school.

**Sas:** Making it a place where you live.

**Choh:** A place where everyone is comfortable and you all want to be there.

### Success Indicators

When assessing the success of their teaching, the Aboriginal teachers discussed the importance of feedback from parents, other teachers, and the behavior of their students.

**Tehmi:** One thing that was really good was that other teachers would come up, especially \_\_teacher's name\_\_ and she would say, "Boy, your students are so nice and respectful and have good manners and respect, I wish my students could be like that." So things like that tell you. Even the parents, like \_\_name\_\_'s son, I had her son, she said, "Boy, \_\_name\_\_'s using all kinds of new words at home now." So when the parents give you feedback like that, then you know you are doing something right. Another way I measured my class to see if I was succeeding or getting across to the kids or doing a good job was through their attendance. If they were in class all the time, and for the students that I know weren't having a good year the year before, like this one boy, \_\_name\_\_, his mom came up and told me, "You know \_\_name\_\_ hardly comes to the office anymore. Boy, last year he was there almost all year." Then she said, "What are you doing with him?" So that way I knew I was doing good with \_\_name\_\_.

**Ena:** I think that the way the kids are carrying themselves physically is one obvious way of seeing that [success]. If they're lagging around just dragging themselves, then you're

probably not doing a good job. But if they're energetic and they are looking forward to doing things, they're coming to class, they get the things done that they have to do, they come early, they bring things that are related to whatever topic you are discussing in class, and you know, they say, "I told this to my mom . . .", they're involved and putting everything they can into it.

**Tthe:** You can see it in their eyes when they catch on to something. It's like a light coming on and you could see that. As you're going through your lesson, you could see that happening here and there.

**Lani:** I don't think I know if I look for things I see, or if I look for things I don't see. I don't see anybody getting frustrated and angered because they can't do certain things.

**Sas:** Yeah, there's cooperation and they're busy and they're on task. At the end of the day, a lot of times you are kind of like forcing the students to leave. Or, you know, saying, "You guys, go somewhere else," (*Laughter from the group.*) and they just want to stay longer or they want to work on something or things like that.

### Summary

Throughout the discussion concerning their work in their classrooms, importance was placed upon creating an environment for learning which met the needs of the whole child and was responsive to family circumstances and community happenings. The behavior of students and feedback received from parents and peers were the measures which these teachers used as indicators of their classroom success.

### Power and Control in the Classroom

Discussion which indicated concern for issues relating to power and control were primarily concerned with the relationship between the teachers and students in the

classroom.

**Sas:** I think control in the classroom is like a very, very big responsibility. I'd rather be there as a facilitator to them, helping them learn to do something, rather than controlling every aspect of the room, I'd go crazy. I'd be nuts. I'd really would . . . You'd be like leaping desks. (*Laughter and nodding agreement.*) There was one teacher who was a control freak and she did, she literally leaped the desks. Everybody said "Ahhhhh, . . . what are you doing?" My little kids I was working with said, "We don't want to get her mad!" (*Much general laughter as this story is related.*)

**Choh:** Trying to get total control would drive you nuts. I think total control, if you try to get total control, I think that will backfire on you. I mean, try to control every little thing a child does . . . when . . . like, "OK, you can stand up now."

**Dlua:** I think that's when the outsiders coming in, with the training they have, they have to control everything. That you have to get your hands on [everything]. And that's when you get into trouble. The students have to have some freedom, meet them half-ways.

**Choh:** Not acting like they're god and know it all, and, if you made a mistake and someone corrects you, that's fine because you can learn something about that community, that person, then the learning can be neutral.

**Sas:** Yeah.

**Choh:** I think its better for the kids if they know, "Well, the teacher she doesn't know everything and she does make mistakes, she's human you know, and you don't have to worship or whatever."

**Sas:** Yeah. I've seen teachers who thought they were god.

**Choh:** Um hmm.

**Lani:** Maybe the best way to get what they call control is through respect. If the kids respect you, you'll have no trouble.

**Choh:** True

## Cultural Negotiation

The Aboriginal teachers were aware of being involved in a continual process of cultural negotiation. The discussion regarding these issues centered around their students and their working environment. Also evident in the discussion is the interaction between participants and the synergism for which focus groups are noted, as two of the participants discuss their experiences working with Native and non-Native students in their classrooms.

### Strategies for Meeting Student Needs

**Dlua:** I've worked in \_\_place name\_\_, where the population is half and half . . . and they had mixed kids in the classrooms. It was hard for me with my traditional way of doing things. The non-Native children didn't really understand me. It was really different coming from a community where I taught just straight Native students in my own language, and then switching over to teaching in English to these two groups.

**M/R: PROBE** Did you find yourself doing things twice?

**Dlua:** Yeah, for the non-Native children.

**Sas:** I never recognized it before. But you see, now I know why \_\_student's name\_\_ stood out in the classroom and I had to work with her one-on-one, it seemed more one-on-one. But, she was the only non-Native in the classroom.

**M/R: PROBE** She couldn't follow what was going on?

**Sas:** She didn't have a clue. The other kids had no problem, but her, I had to stop and take time and really explain things to her and then she could go on. Once she got it, I didn't have to worry about her, but it was getting her going. She couldn't follow what I was telling the rest of the kids.

**Dlua:** But if [white children] come from a home that has no contact with Native people and are put into a school setting . . . and then, if a non-Native grows up in a Native

community, right from before they start school, they mingle among the town people and then when they [the white children] get into the school setting they can understand.

**Sas:** I found the non-Native student would also ask for permission more for things. Can I do this? Can I do that, Sas? I want to do that . . . the [native students] were more independent that way, I think. They were more willing to explore.

**Dlua:** Yeah, they would just go and do it.

**Lani:** I had one non-Native child and that's what I did, too. I had to do things twice for one student.

**Sas:** Strange, aye? Isn't that odd?

### Systemic Negotiation

Time constraints and cultural practices were topics that participants brought up with regard to negotiating within the educational system.

**Ena:** When you are working in the schools, there are so many things that have to be done in certain times, in these ways, it's easier sometimes to go the quick route rather than going the route you know that's going to benefit the kids. Instead of what is going to benefit the principal, this deadline, that deadline. It's sometimes easier to go that way, than what you really want to do with your kids.

**Dlua:** They don't give too much leeway either, if there's something happening in the community, then the classroom won't be that structured. Maybe a lot of review that day and still you have to stay in some guideline they gave you. That's the hard part [the negotiation between community life/goings-on and the system.]

**Sas:** If there's something happening in the community every day of the week then you're in trouble.

**Tehmi:** In our school, we just started "feeding of the fire." I think what we are trying to do is have this once in the beginning of the school year and once at the end of the school

year. [Feeding the fire] . . . has been done in the community for as long as I can remember, but in our school, just recently. So that's something new. Also, at least once during the day, I tried to have a sharing circle. In that, we use a rock or another object that we choose to use and there's rules that go with that and whoever has the rock has the power to speak and nobody else can say anything. When you're done, you pass the rock on. Some people do it different ways, where after they're finished talking, that's it. But then another way is after that person is finished talking, everyone says "Thank you for sharing that" or " Thank you," and the next person goes. Outside our school, we have a tent frame with a canvas on it and anybody that wants to go in there and do some work can. But the only thing is that it is hard to take the older students in there because the tent is not very big and there's just so much you can do in just the limited space. So different things like that we try to use.

### Reconstructing

Participants also spoke about changes they would make in their practices or the process by which students pass through the system.

**Sas:** Well, I just think I didn't stop learning because I left high school. I mean its a life long process and it should be that way for my children. It also should have been the same for me that, you know, I'd take more time if need be. But everything tells you that you have to be done with things at a certain age . . . like don't have children till you're how old now . . . thirty-six? (*General laughter*)

**Lani:** Uh oh, mine's twenty-five.

**Dlua:** You guys are all excluded (*laughter*) except me . . . . But seriously, one should continue to learn at your own pace.

**Sas:** Yes, I see that with \_\_son's name\_\_, where he's got so much packed into the year he couldn't possibly finish it, not at his snail's pace. You know, he's content to toddle along. Like, he's really slow this kid, really slow. But, I'm content if he's going to be in

grade seven three years, I don't care. (*General assent from the group.*) But it's the institution that's really bothered by the fact that it's OK for us, for him to be there, three years or two years. They don't like that idea.

**Dlua:** Because all they are doing, like \_\_name\_\_ for example, is that children are pushed and pushed. They're just pushing him through the system and he's not learning anything.

**Lani:** But, how to get rid of that? I mean the grading and the going from this grade to this grade.

**Sas:** Not have a graded system that kids pass on through.

**Lani:** OK, then. So what will you have? Because then, if they want to come out, go to colleges or universities or transfer schools, you are going to face a grading system.

**Sas:** Well, you have to have something in place to check them, but that doesn't mean it's like grade one or grade two or grade three. Maybe what they need to meet [the skill level] in grade seven he doesn't meet until he's in grade nine or something, but you know he's meeting those goals. Have certain goals at different ages or something.

While there is no disagreement from others in the group regarding the inappropriateness of a graded education system, resolution of the problem is not reached. The next topic concerns negotiating classroom processes.

**Dlua:** I probably wouldn't be in a building a lot, I'd be out exploring and learning the way that I learned, by doing things, by seeing things. By observing and trying rather than trying to do all those things from in the classroom, from books. There's lots you can do for your science and social studies, out there, right there in your community, right in your back door.

**Tehmi:** Also, like Ena has said, [students learn] . . . not so much by hearing all the time. I think that really turns the students off, when there is someone just standing up there and talking, and talking, and talking. It's just for the first few minutes that they really hear

everything that is said and then everything else is nothing

**Dlua:** I actually like to have the actual hands on manipulative activities.

**Tehmi:** Another thing that I think is really important is having people from the community come in instead of always using books to explain things. Even though our elders have probably never gone to school, or just for a few years, they're the ones with all the knowledge. Everything you find in books, the elders have all of that plus more. You know?

**Ena:** All that and a bag of chips. (*Laughter ripples around the table.*)

### Summary

Clearly, the participants are aware of the cultural negotiations which are part of their daily work. These negotiations are perceived to be taking place through their involvement with non-Native students, their delivery of a curriculum, and the Euro-Canadian format of the institution with its graded classroom system and organization of time in the linear fashion.

### Observations—Teachers From the Outside

The observations made about the teachers recruited from outside the Northwest Territories, the non-Native newcomers, are concerned with teacher attitudes, community relations, and classroom practices. The participants are open about their perceptions with regard to the issues which they identify and offer some advice to these teachers who come to teach in the North.



## Perceived Attitudes and Behaviors

**Ena:** Sometimes, I can't help but think that when they know they are going up to the Territories or into a community, that they have a certain mind set, that they've heard all these stories so they expect it to be a certain way. They come with ideas since they've heard things. Preconceived notions. So they are going to treat them [their students] that way, and that's what they do.

**Sas:** I think a lot of them are not flexible either. They're not willing to change either, they're not willing to change their ways at all.

**Lani:** A lot of them are so critical. They don't look at what the student's doing right, it's always what they've done wrong. I think it's what they base their thinking on, what the student's doing wrong.

**Choh:** Also, how they assume that their way is the one way to do things.

**Sas:** Yeah, I've seen teachers who thought they were good.

**Choh:** Um hmm.

**Tthe:** The school I work in, it's about a 40/60 percent mixture of kids [Dene/ Metis and Non-Aboriginal]. There's pretty well that colour barrier though . . . a full-time classroom assistant, that's pretty well the highest that Aboriginal people [from the North] are doing in that school. Like we're all janitors, special needs, or classroom assistants. There are no Aboriginal teachers or principals in \_\_place name\_\_, there's nothing like that. It was kind of hard a couple of years ago to work with that. Really hard. There were some people in there that were, I could honestly say that they were racist. They wanted nothing, absolutely nothing of Aboriginal content in the school. Just like they all have a mind-set that this is a white school and a white community and when these kids grow up they're not going to stay in the N.W.T. so why bother teaching them anything about it. It's like all geared towards pushing the kids to the South.

**Dlua:** I think that's when the outsiders coming in, with the training they have had, they have to control everything. That you have to get your hands on. And that's when you get into trouble.

## Community Relations

The participants also mentioned some of the non-Aboriginal teacher behaviors which were perceived as a reflection of the teachers' lack of acceptance for the communities in which they were working. Their reflections encompass their childhood experiences and the events they witness in their communities today.

**Sas:** They really do form little groups, and then, they tend to stick together and isolate themselves.

**Ena:** I find, too, that all my teachers, when I was going to school, they'd go to work and then they'd go home. You never see them other than in school . . . these teachers came up from god knows where (*laughter around the table*) and they came to school in the morning and went right back into their houses. "OK, we're not going to do anything, we're not going to be living forever in this community so let's not make any friends, let's just keep out of the Natives way as much as possible," was their attitude.

**Dlua:** . . . like most northern communities that have non-Native groups, they all stick together, and they really do isolate themselves and then, they do get into a lot of trouble.

**Tthe:** I think silence really embarrasses them.

**Ena:** I found that when I am at home and I am with my students, or family or anybody at home, we do things together and we don't necessarily have to be talking all the time. But I find in white culture, you have to be talking all the time, otherwise something is wrong with you.

**Sas:** I think another thing that really bugs me is the way teachers, not all of them but some of them, is that they turn their nose up at the traditional foods when it is offered to them.

**Choh:** I know.

**Sas:** You take it. Maybe, you know, accept it. You don't have to take lots, like at a feast or something.

**Choh:** They got to show their face around town once in a while, go to a feast or something.

**Sas:** Well, you know what they say is “Oh, if you saw the way that they butchered this animal. . . would you eat it?”

*(speaker acts out her answer)* “Well, yeah, I eat it, . . . what do you think?” *(Chorus of Yeah (s) and lots of laughter at this point)* “The same way you butcher dead cow that’s sent to the store.” *(More laughter)*

**Dlua:** A lot of times people that come, referring to our community \_\_place name\_\_, teachers come in and, then, they just do what they have to do there and stay in their little group and do not be part of the community and don’t show any “careness.” It kinda’ makes kids lose respect for them.

**Ena:** . . . and if the teachers, when I was growing up, had gone out into the community, they probably would have had a better experience. They maybe would have gotten feedback from us if they had tried to be part of the community.

### Classroom Organization and Practices

Once again, the perceptions of the Aboriginal teachers are voiced from their experiences, both as children attending school and as teachers who work in classrooms and schools along side their non-Native colleagues. Their stories, memories, and comments are concerned with the behaviors of teachers in the classrooms and the classroom environments.

**Lani:** We have talked about teaching and when non-Native teachers are so structured in what they do.

**Ena:** Yeah. And when I’m teaching, I try and think about when I was a student, there

was some pretty rough periods in my growing up and it was harder to go to school because you went to school and you knew you had to do all these things and these teachers came in with an iron ruler and said “This is what I have planned today, this is what we are going to do and if I have to, you know, take you by the hair and let you do this and get it done, because it says in my book this has to be done today and that’s what’s going to happen.”

**Choh:** Yeah. And I also don’t like rows. The teacher in [her daughter’s class], puts the students all in rows, and she hates it. She doesn’t do anything. Everyday she’s there after school. She can do all of this stuff, she’d rather socialize I think, and she’s a sociable child. Then they stuck her, because she talked too much, they stuck her at the absolute back, back there at the very back of the class and they said, “Well, she’s talking a little too much.” But even when they moved her back there, she was still talking to the kids in front of her and beside her. That didn’t help.

**Dlua:** They had moved her out of their hearing, I guess.

**Lani:** So they don’t have to deal with it. (*The child’s talking in class*)

**Choh:** Yeah, I guess so.

**Ena:** I think that when, with non-Aboriginal teachers, if kids aren’t doing whatever they’re supposed to be doing in the class, then they tend to harass and harass and harass. And each time the student gets lower and lower and lower. The harder you harass them, the more they’re going to put that wall up and, then, the teachers can’t do anything with them.

**Sas:** They bring things from their own culture, I’ll just use an example, I’m not saying its one that they’ve used. Valentines or Thanksgiving . . . Thanksgiving is probably a good one . . . that I don’t even know what it’s called, that - that big horn thing . . .

**Dlua:** That horn— horn of plenty?

**R/M:** Cornucopia . . . I think it’s called a cornucopia . . .

**Choh:** Oh yeah . . .

**Dlua:** That thing . . .

**Sas:** Yeah, they get these children to colour all this stuff falling out of it, and this thing,

they [the children] have no idea what it is. I just think, *what are you doing?* (General laughter) You know?

**Dlua:** Thanksgiving, that's not our notion of Thanksgiving.

**Choh:** This one teacher took all the kids that weren't at grade level and put them in one group, all the ones that were doing well were in one group, and all the ones that were kind of in between were in one group, so there were three groups and they were all at the same level [in each group] These lower kids didn't get anywhere because they were always bugging each other, and the ones that were sitting doing their work all the time, of course, they were going to continue to do well. That was really hard for me because it didn't help any because it still allowed for these lower kids to continue what they were doing, you know, kick, fight, and scream, and everything. But I think if they were mixed with a couple of these other little, you know, quieter group, I think there wouldn't have been so much commotion.

**Lani:** They would had the peer pressure.

**Ena:** And just listening to her talk now, I'm thinking about when I was going to school. and when I was going to school it was the complete opposite of how I want to teach. When I'm teaching, that's what I try and think of.

**Tehmi:** Sometimes I think that way, too, but I have to remember that they're also the ones that helped me get to where I am now too, so I can't completely be negative. I can only use their experiences and change some things that I think weren't very good and take the good things. Be able to choose that way.

**Tthe:** Just going back to how we all got here some way, it shouldn't have been at the expense of the culture, and self-esteem, and pride. It seems to be like a half-victory.

### Suggestions for non-Native Teachers

When the participants were asked to make recommendations for non-Native teachers, they drew from the discussion and their experiences the following suggestions. Their advice is simply stated. The words becoming part of, respect, and caring are

scattered through their dialogue.

**Ena:** I think for any non-Aboriginal teacher who is going to come to the North and teach, they have to become a part of the community if they are going to be effective and become a part of the school community.

**Tehmi:** When I think about it now, the teachers that we've had in the past, the ones that they'll still talk about, or the ones that still come up, are the ones that were part of the community. They're the ones that took the time to go out and do things with the people. That took the time to come out to the carnival, or go to church, or anything like that. They're the ones that interacted with the people and, of course, those are the ones that the people will remember.

**M/R: PROBE** - They built relationships?

**Tehmi:** Um hmm. And when they do that, I think the elders and the parents, that's what they look for, and when they see somebody that they respect, then they don't mind going up to that person and saying good things, not only bad things. If it is something bad, then they'll say it in a respectful way instead of coming out to criticize. I think that's really important, especially if the teacher wants to be successful and be open to ways of doing things differently, to help the students.

**Ena:** I think for any non-Aboriginal teacher who is going to come to the North and teach, they have to become a part of the community if they are going to be effective and become a part of the school community.

**Lani:** Even a non-Native that goes in a Native community, if they get involved in the

community willingly and that, then they are very well respected.

**Dlua:** The students have to have some freedom, meet them half-ways. First of all, get to meet the community.

**Lani:** They should also be more flexible.

**Dlua:** You have to get involved.

**Ena:** You should always be the same equal level and just remember that.

**Tehmi:** It's things like that, that they need to learn. For them to be teaching our students, they need to know a little bit about our students. Like what Ena was saying, the things that we do socially, like you don't have to talk or explain things all the time. I think the most important thing is we learn by watching, like Ena had said, and not so much by hearing all the time. I think that really turns the students off, when there is someone just standing up there and talking, and talking, and talking. It's just for the first few minutes that they really hear everything that is said and then, everything else is nothing. It's things like that, that they need to learn about the people or the culture that they are working with. They need some kind of cultural education about the people, I think that's a must.

**Dlua:** Caring is the big key, too. If you show you care then they show you respect. Cause a lot of times people that come, referring to our community \_\_\_place name\_\_\_, teachers come in and then they just do what they have to do there and stay in their little group and not be part of the community and don't show any "careness." It kinda makes kids lose respect for them. Careness is the big key.

## Conclusion

The presentation of the focus groups' discussion, as presented in this chapter, closes with a final participant comment made by Tehmi, "I think when you talk about your life and work, then in a sense you are sharing and in a sense you are attempting to pass on . . . and that you are not trying to keep it to yourself, because then who does it really help, just one little group. But you want to pass on the knowledge, experiences and stories, expand it so we're much stronger in what we do."



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **INTERPRETATION AND SUMMARY, OBSERVATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS**

This chapter will discuss three major topics. The first will review the original research questions of this study and offer the summative results of the study based on the Aboriginal teachers' responses, on the literature, and on my interpretations. Focus groups are noted in the academic literature for providing a wealth of data. The presentation of the data in Chapter Four affirms this assertion. During the focused discussions, participant observations extended beyond the scope of this exploratory study. The first portion of this discussion incorporates only the data relevant to the topic under consideration. Further confirmation of the points that are made may be found in Chapter Four, where the data are presented in discussion format. Observations regarding the use of focus group methodology with Aboriginal research participants will be presented. The final portion of this discussion will mention other themes raised by participants during the focus groups which may be of interest as suggestions for further research.

## Review of the Research Questions

The study focused on the socialization experiences of Northern Canadian Aboriginal teachers that influenced their beliefs, attitudes and the choices which they made in the development of their classroom learning environments. The three research questions which framed this exploratory study were:

1. Are there traditional Aboriginal socialization practices that influence Aboriginal teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and choices when developing their classroom learning environments?
2. Is there a connection between Aboriginal teachers' articulated values and traditional teachings?
3. Which aspects of Aboriginal teachers' classroom learning environments and the accompanying value-based rationales would they recommend be included in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers' training?

Supplementary questions that served to guide the research also facilitate the presentation of the results of the study by providing an organizational framework, (a) socialization within the family and community setting; (b) classroom learning environments; (c) success indicators; and (d) non-Native teachers; and (e) recommendations.

The results discussed in this chapter represent the researcher's summary of the participants' comments and insights, the interpretations of the researcher, and the correlation to relevant research in Aboriginal education. The reader is advised that these findings cannot be generalized to every situation, but it is hoped that they may offer insight to those Native and non-Native teachers who find themselves working in similar

cross-cultural classroom contexts.

### Socialization Within Family and Community

Each culture has its means by which it assists children to become responsible, contributing members of the group. As noted by King, Chipman, and Cruz-Janzen (1994), the socialization which takes place is a “dynamic process that brings human beings into the human group, causing an individual to internalize the values, mores, traditions, language, and attitudes of the culture in which they live” (p. 91). Further, as Millard (1993) points out, the purpose of education in both its traditional and its modern form is cultural transmission (p. 4). The Aboriginal concept of education is that fundamentally education is learning about life through participation and relationship in community contexts (Armstrong, 1987; Jules, 1988; Sikora, 1994; Cajete, 1994, Hampton, 1995, Stairs, 1995). Further, as Wandzura (1992) notes, Aboriginal people believe education is a life-long process and the responsibility of all community members, each person in the community being a teacher and a learner (p. 1). Since the first issue of concern to this study was the exploration of traditional socialization practices that influenced the Aboriginal teachers’ perceptions, attitudes, and choices when developing their classroom learning environments, the first topic which the participants were asked to discuss was their experiences within their families, extended families, and communities.

### Grandparents

The first theme to emerge from the participants’ discussion was the influence of

their grandparents in their lives, particularly their grandmothers. Choh stated, “ My grandparents had a big part in my life. . . .” Sas contributed to the discussion saying, “. . . my grandparents were very active in raising us . . . [they] were very influential on my parents.” Ena added her agreement as she spoke of the role her grandmother played in her life. She said, “My grandmother was probably the most influential person when I was growing up because she kept us most of the time.” Finally, Tehmi, who described herself as experiencing a more “white man” orientation to family life stated that, “I knew when my mom wasn’t there and she couldn’t make supper for everybody, or whatever, it was my grandmother that came and she did things.” Clearly, the participants were influenced during their childhood by the roles and responsibilities fulfilled by the elders in their families, particularly their grandmothers, who acted as care-givers and first teachers.

#### Rules, Responsibilities and Restrictions

It is interesting to note that while participants spoke of having freedom to explore and referred to having choice with regard to learning, they also discussed the restrictions that were placed upon them as children while learning to fulfill responsibilities in the family group. Storytelling as a means of contextualizing the restrictions and ensuring the safety of children was one example which was explored. Sas began the discussion by asking the others if their parents or grandparents had ever used scarey stories. Dlua responded, “Yeah, bushman . . . it’s the major one. We used to get scarey stories to keep us away from things, you know? I’m sure they made them up, too.” Dlua, Sas, and Choh also remembered that there were always relatives or older friends around to monitor their

actions. Dlua said, “The extended family would step in if my parents weren’t there, an aunt or an uncle or even an older cousin.” Choh remembered her older brothers as always being there to take care of the little ones, even though they weren’t told to, “. . . if we were doing something we shouldn’t or went somewhere we shouldn’t, then they were always there to say ‘Come back’.” All participants remembered similar restrictions with regard to staying away from the water, not being allowed to go past a certain area or up-town, or staying within sight of their mothers, and being indoors after dark.

When discussing responsibilities, participants agreed that it was around the age of eight to ten years old when children were expected to assume responsibility in and around the home. As Lani stated, “My sister and I [did chores] for a long time, and then when [her younger sisters] became like nine or ten, then they started helping too. Then there was four of us.” Dlua also recalls being eight or nine by the time she and her sister “were responsible to do some other house chores . . . doing the dishes, sweeping the floor, washing the floor if needed, but that was like a big job , so if we want to we can but we don’t have to. . . .”

Only Ena, who was the youngest in her family was exempt from chores. She laughingly told the others, “. . . being the youngest, I wasn’t given as much responsibility. . . as much as the others were and my sisters made sure that I was really clear about that.” The traditional practice of “indulgences for the youngest child” (Boult, n.d., p. 10) was clearly in effect with regard to Ena’s experience.

Traditionally, gender separation and specific training fulfilled the need to maintain a balance between the roles of men and women, each acquiring skills which

complemented the other's in the society. Elder Philip Buggins' comments serve to illustrate the metaphor of balance,

When my wife was still alive we talked to each other just the way it should be. The wife was boss in the house and the husband was boss outside. We got along good when we stayed together. If I hadn't been married, I don't know what I would have been today. (Beaulieu, 1981, p. 13)

The socialization differences between boys and girls have continued to reflect the traditional separation of the genders as children matured (Boult, n.d.; Jones-Sparck, 1994). Sas remarked that as young children, living with their grandparents, she and her brothers were raised "just the same." However, as participants grew older, they recalled the separation of genders with regard to roles, responsibilities, and freedom. Lani mentioned the fact that "her brother never had to do dishes or sweep the floor, but he took the garbage out and was helping my dad. If my dad needed the stairs swept or outside things done, that was his." Significantly, dad had taken over the training for responsibilities of her brother. Beaulieu, (1987) provides documentation of this traditional socialization pattern through interviews with Dene elders who state, "My dad would talk to us about everything. When we went out hunting or trapping, he would tell me what to do" (p. 13) and "I used to help my dad working around the house. Sometimes we visited nets. When I was twelve years old, I started helping my dad" (p. 14).

Also, as they matured, the rules shifted with regard boys and girls. Dlua recalls that in her situation "they were more strict with the girls than with the boys," and Ena reports that the boys in her family "were given so much more freedom than the girls were." The girls began to be encouraged to remain around the home and take over the

related responsibilities, their mothers assuming the role of teachers (Boult, n.d.; Goulet, 1988; Beaulieu, 1991).

Sas corroborates the opinions of Dlua and Ena with regard to her brother's freedom, then adds, "My brothers were protective, too. They used to make sure I was home by 10 o'clock . . . and then go out." The theme of protective brothers is corroborated by Dlua, ". . . they would protect you and make sure you were home" and Choh, ". . . they were always there. . . they were taking care of us, you know, kind of really protective." Thus, their brothers began to be socialized into the male role of "hunter and protector" (Boult, n.d.; Barnaby, Shimpo & Struthers, 1991), a fitting practice in a culture which continues to maintain a mixed subsistence economy where hunting, fishing, and trapping provides much of the family's food (Berger, 1991). It is also probable that socialization occurring within the families and communities which emphasizes the female's role as care-giver and first teacher contributes to the fact that there are far more female Aboriginal teachers working in the north than males. Further, male teachers tend to be found working in the cultural areas of the curriculum, as noted in Tehmi's reference to her consultation with the male cultural teacher in her school about the preparation of the "snared rabbit."

It is also important to note that strict role separation was not always the case—at times female children would be raised to work with their fathers if there were no male children of a suitable age. Dlua tells about her mother's situation, "She got pulled out [of residential school] early because she was the only one, there were just girls in her family, all my uncles had passed on when they were young, and so she was the trapper with my

grandfather. She kind of took the boy's role in her family." Additional confirmation for this cultural adaptation is presented by Boulton (n.d.), Beaulieu (1991), and Barnaby, Shimp & Struthers (1991).

An exchange of experiences describing the means by which children's behavior was corrected surfaced in a story which Sas told: "[My youngest son] did something the other day and [his older brother] was there and I told him 'That's not the way you do it. That is not the way you behave,' But it was really [my youngest son] that I was directing [my comments] at." Choh responded by saying that she and her sister got disciplined from their three older brothers who would talk to them and say, "Why do you do things like that?" or "Why are you . . . ?" Restrictions were also imposed by extended family members who would caution children about playing where they weren't supposed to be. Finally, Lani suggested that ignoring inappropriate behavior was a possible alternative, or if that approach failed, talking to the young person would be appropriate.

The approaches to disciplining children which the participants discussed: (a) indirectly talking about the inappropriate behavior when the child was within hearing distance; (b) ignoring certain behavior; (c) and talking to the young person who is behaving inappropriately are child rearing strategies referred to as "traditional" within the literature ( Gilliland cited in Noddings, 1992; Education Development Branch, 1993; Lamothe & Cizek, 1993; Boulton, n.d.). Yet, clearly, those particular child-rearing practices were in effect during these young women's childhood years and have continued to be applied with regard to their own child-rearing practices.



## Learning Within the Family and Community Context

The second theme to arise from participant discussions was that of learning within the environment of the extended family and community. Harold Balsillie, a Dene elder from Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories, describes the role of elders as teachers within the northern Aboriginal society: “In the old days the young people were taught by the old people. The old people would show them how to set traps, make a fire, boil tea, and all that. The old person would sit there and let the kid do it” (Beaulieu, 1987, p. 9). Thus, the traditional system of education required learning through extended observation before first attempts, experience, and a process of becoming.

Leavitt (1995) asserts that in Native communities “parents and elders maintain the integration of knowledge as they teach younger people by sharing experiences with them, not by isolating the knowledge and skills required by certain disciplines” (p. 132). During the focus group discussions, participants also spoke about learning necessary life-skills within the context of a community-based supportive learning environment characterized by intrinsic motivation. Grandmothers were described by Tthe and Ena as being soft spoken, very quiet, kind, and gentle as well as having a lot of patience. Ena stated: “Growing up with my grandmother, she didn’t do a lot of disciplining. My grandmother gave us all of her attention so you didn’t have to do anything to try and get it.” The participants’ descriptions of their grandmother’s attributes agrees with Sterling’s (1995) portrait of her grandmother, Yetko, whom she describes as humanistic educator who acted as a facilitator who was concerned with creating an open climate of trust and acceptance in which children were free to experiment and learn (p. 120).

### The Learning Process

The learning process was described by Choh as “basically observing.” During the process of “watching over and over again,” one would learn. Sas recalled her grandmother as “being there to sort of teach you” to sew or do different things when you played house. Participants remembered actually wanting to learn. Sas said, “They almost enticed you to be interested.” All of the group members agreed with her statement. Choh noted that “you want to be like them.” Sas also noted: “learning is fun like they made it. That’s what enticed you to observe the first time, because there was lots of laughter in their task.” Dlua agreed with Sas, saying that “they didn’t make it a job, although it was something that had to be done. There was laughter and laughter is the key to making hard work good.” Thus, as children participants learned within a context of family relationships and community, their “lessons” taking place within the real-life context of their natural environment. Clearly, through “hearing” the participants’ accounts of their experiences, one can conclude that the traditional role as teachers which elders played in northern Aboriginal society continued to be an important aspect of their socialization.

Their teachers were varied, participants remembered learning from mothers, grandparents, uncles, aunts, siblings, and mothers-in-law. The members of participants’ families and extended families assumed the role of teachers who were “models, not simply instructors” ( Leavitt, 1995, p. 135). Children learned by “teaching themselves how to do it by watching, imitating, and participating” ( p. 134) through experience with adults, within the context of their daily lives. Stairs (1995) makes use of a term borrowed from

the North Baffin Inuit, “Isumaqsayuq, the way of passing on knowledge through the observation and imitation embedded in daily family and community activities, integration into the immediate shared social structure being the principal goal” (p. 140) to identify the learning process which the Aboriginal participants described as they related their personal experiences.

Also common to all participants was the experience of learning in an environment structured for success. Choh describes the process of learning to assume the responsibility of caring for siblings as one which “starts out small with little tiny jobs that are really easy and actually fun to do and then it gets bigger and bigger and then soon you are looking after your little brothers and sisters.” Dlua adds that “there is supervision where we watch them, but mom is there to watch us.” The process of learning by assuming responsibility for small portions of the whole task is described by Stairs (1995) as backwards chaining, a process in which the “final steps of essential adult tasks are progressively left undone for children to complete, thus giving them an immediate and important role in community work” ( p. 140). Further examples of this approach to learning were described by the participants as they recalled learning to make moccasins. Dlua tells of her mother starting the outside of the beading and, then, leaving the inside, the easier part, for her to complete. She also describes how her mother-in-law cut out the pattern for her when she attempted to sew her first pair of moccasins. Choh confirms the process stating that her mother would “do the patterns” so she would know where to put the beads. Though their first attempts were less than perfect, neither participant was reprimanded for their less-than-satisfactory efforts. Choh admits that her first attempts at

beading were “really bad” — “horrendous” in fact. Dlua also states that her first moccasin appeared “like it got shrunk and wrinkled” and “looked really bad.” Yet, their ‘teachers’ provided encouragement, Choh’s mother telling her that “Everybody does that, you know. You gotta keep doing it,” and Dlua’s mother-in-law saying, “Well, it looks OK for your first time.” Sas adds to the discussion commenting that “even if you try, and make a mistake, they don’t discipline you for mistakes, your mistake is part of your learning.” This statement drew general agreement from all members of the group. Lani concurred with Sas’s comment and added that “It’s like that. If you feel good, then you’ll learn a lot better and a lot easier.”

It is apparent that as participants experienced learning as a process within the context of close family relationships, their teachers were models, allowing them to observe repeatedly before attempting a new task. As children, it was assumed that they would learn at their own pace. Dlua comments, “ I was not really forced because my mom made it look so simple,” and Choh added “It was not really something you were actually told to do.” Finally, Sas comments, “We did dishes if we wanted to or made our beds, to make your mom happy, or you know, you accomplished something.” Thus, the participants experienced learning as purposeful enterprise through completion of increasingly complex tasks participants acquired skills which made important contributions to their families and communities.

#### Focus on Achievement and Respect

Finally, the focus was placed on achievement during the learning process. Choh

explained, “I don’t think I’ve ever felt like I’ve failed anything, even if I failed something, because I knew if I failed a course in high school, and I’ve done that a few times, my Mom wouldn’t make a big deal out of it. She wouldn’t go huffing and puffing and make me feel bad about it . . . you know sometimes you have to fail things, sometimes you are not going to do as well as you want, you’re better at other things. And I didn’t ever feel like I was a failure. No matter what I did, no matter how badly I did or how well I did, she was always going to love everyone of us, and she does.” Within northern Aboriginal culture, a child’s learning is seen as a process of becoming. The need to continue observing and practicing the skills to be learned is accepted as part of the learning process. Children are perceived as being “born with integrity. The child has worth. It is the birthright of the child to be acknowledged and respected for this” ( Education Development Branch, 1993, p. xxiv). The concept of unconditional respect for the student is also documented in the academic literature by Winzer and Grigg (1992) who contend that “according to humanistic educators, good teachers have three attitudinal qualities: (a) realness or genuineness; (b) unconditional respect for each student; and (c) empathetic understanding” (cited in Sterling, 1995, p. 120). These teachers “act as facilitators” and are concerned with creating “an open climate of trust and acceptance in which children are free to experiment and learn” (p. 120).

### Summary

To recapitulate, the continuance of the traditional role of elders, family members, and community as influential care-givers and teachers within Aboriginal society that is

noted in the academic research ( Beaulieu, 1987; Lamothe & Cizek, 1993; Sterling, 1995; Hampton, 1995) was confirmed by the Aboriginal participants who collaborated in the focus group discussions. Further, it is clear that the tradition of children “learning by following the example set by older people” through spending time with an “older person of the same sex” who would show them how to master various skills (Boult, n.d., p. 11) was part of their socialization process.

Finally, the Aboriginal teachers articulated key points regarding the learning process which they experienced; (a) learning experiences took place within the context of family, extended family and community, with their teachers acting as models, setting the example; (b) learning was accomplished by individual effort through a process of careful observation, imitation, and practice; (c) education took place within the natural ebb and flow of family and community life, when it was convenient for both parties; (d) learning was purposeful, resulting in the learner being able to make a contribution to the family; (e) restrictions were used as a means to protect children and correction of behavior occurred by talking indirectly about the child, or ignoring the behavior; or speaking to the child about their behavior; (f) unconditional respect for the child, empathy, and genuine caring were attitudes which their “teachers” possessed. Thus, the teaching/learning process experienced as part of the Aboriginal teachers’ socialization was carried out within a humanistic paradigm which focused upon their individual successes. Embodied in the participants’ conversations, the reoccurring traditional value-based themes of respect, responsibility, caring, and sharing were discernible whatever the topic of discussion happened to be. It is evident from the Aboriginal teachers’ reminiscences about their

childhood experiences that, as Cajete (1994) asserts, “traditional education processes have continued” within the context of their Aboriginal families and communities (p. 19).

### Aboriginal Teachers in the Formal Education Setting

The purpose of education, in both its traditional and its modern forms is cultural transmission. Formal education, schooling, as a society’s means of transmitting culture and world view to succeeding generations is, historically, accepted in Euro-Canadian culture. Schools have been the primary tool for socializing children into the dominant Euro-Canadian cultural “values, mores, traditions, language, and attitudes (King, Chipman & Cruz-Janzen, 1994, p. 110). This stated goal of formal education, the transmission of an alien culture, places Aboriginal teachers and students in a situation whereby cultural negotiation is imperative if the recognized need for “Native approaches to educational methods and structures” (Hampton, 1995, p. 10) is ever to be realized. Stairs’ (1994) observation that within the context of education, the first premise underlying a cultural negotiation is that school is a cultural phenomenon (p. 155) coincides with this observation. Lipka and Stairs (1994) further confirm the importance of schools as sites of cultural negotiation for Aboriginal teachers and students when they state “the cultural negotiation of schools is embedded in a forum for the meeting of dominant and small cultures in all their aspects — language, social norms, material way of life, knowledge and belief systems, and power relationships” (p. 1).

The second issue of concern to this study was the exploration of the Aboriginal teachers’ perceptions and practices with regard to their classroom learning environments.

Rhodes (1988) definition of the classroom as the “formal-in-school educational environment of the classroom with the teacher, the one we are all familiar with and think of as education” (p. 25) is applicable to this discussion. It is also of consequence to note Orioux’s (1988) reference to teachers as “key agents” in the educational process who bring to the classroom the “accumulation of their individual cultural backgrounds” (p. 61). Stairs (1995) confirms the importance of classroom teachers as “cultural transmitters, acknowledging that within the education process, teachers bring with them their culturally patterned ways of organizing and passing on knowledge, the value systems of their communities, and their definition of what is important to learn and the most appropriate way to learn it” (p. 28). The purpose for exploring Aboriginal teachers’ perceptions and practices with regard to their classroom learning environments was to identify the traditional cultural values, norms, and socialization practices integral to their work within the formal school setting.

Topics to be discussed with regard to the Aboriginal teachers’ classroom learning environments are: (a) the importance of building relationships in the community; (b) developing respectful relationships between teacher and student, issues of power and control and classroom discipline practices; (c) consideration of the whole child and meeting needs; (d) physical aspects of the classroom environment; and (e) indicators of success. The discussion which follows constitutes the exploration of the Aboriginal teachers’ infusion of traditional cultural norms, attitudes, and practices acquired during their socialization process into their classroom learning environments.

Brizinski’s (1989) definition of culture as the collection of values, rules, and



attitudes held by a society which allows people to communicate, to interpret behavior, and to attach shared meaning to behavior and events is important to note. Throughout the participants' deliberations, it is clear that they share common understandings with regard to students' behavior, community values and norms, and the elements which come together to constitute an appropriate classroom learning environment.

### Building Relationships in the Community

The concept of community, perceived as the intimate relationship of living things, is a fundamental aspect of traditional Aboriginal culture. The participants in this study confirm the importance of community acceptance, arrived at through creating relationships, to their work as classroom teachers. Their discussion includes the importance of building relationships with community members, young and old, and some of the means by which these relationships are established.

Dlua begins the discussion by describing her relationship to the community in which she teaches: "I'm married into the family and I have connections to some of the students. I'm their aunt I guess, more or less, and so they have more respect . . . they tend to listen and tend to do what you would like them to do." From Dlua's perspective, being connected to the community through marriage ensured that her students would accept her as a relative and behave accordingly, with respect. She also comments on the implications for teachers "without relations" or connections to the community, ". . . if this or that particular child is with another teacher that is not from the community, or has no connections with people from the community, they tend not to listen to them. They'll

do everything that they would in their powers to make their life miserable.”

Sas then contributes her perspective: “I taught in that same community, I didn’t have any family connections, but I think the students I worked with liked and had respect for me. But they were allowed in my home, they could come for dinner, they could come any time and their parents came anytime. It was kind of like an open door policy . . . and no one would be left out. That’s how we became involved in the community, by letting them come and then we would go out.”

Family connections, an open door, accepting students and parents into one’s home, and the importance of venturing out into the community are important aspects of developing community relationships that were articulated by Dlua and Sas. Focus group participants frequently used the terms “connections,” “involvement,” “ties,” “visiting,” “acceptance,” “acknowledge,” “go out,” “fit in,” and “respect” during the discussion regarding community relationships presented in Chapter Four. These words, when linked together, become symbolic of an intricate net of community relationships important to the successful practice of a classroom teacher. Further, they indicate the continuation of the traditional value of community within northern Aboriginal culture.

#### Respectful Teacher — Student Relationships

Academic research confirms the important impact of socialization on both teachers and students. Swisher and Deyhle (1989) conclude that the individual teacher’s approach to teaching and learning is influenced by the socialization practices, values, and norms of the culture in which the individual has been enculturated (p. 82). Students also

bring to the classroom the values, norms, community-based knowledge and practices to which they have been enculturated. Lyons (1990) recognizes the dynamic of student-teacher affiliation by confirming that values impact the relationship between the teacher and the student in everyday interaction (p. 172).

### Teacher Attitudes That Define Interaction

Respect was the characteristic of teacher-student relationships that was mentioned most often by the participants when discussing the quality of student-teacher relationship which they strived for. Discussion ebbed and flowed around the topic of respect and included references to the manner in which students were treated by teachers, as in this example of a conversation shared between Lani and Sas. Lani is making a comment about her relationship with a particularly troubled student: “I just treated him like all the other kids. I liked him and I always talked to him and asked him what was going on, but I never pried and tried to get things out of him. If he was going to tell me, then he was going to tell me, but if he wasn’t then he wasn’t.” Sas, “You respected his privacy for himself.” Lani, “Yes, I believed very strongly that he went through that, but I wasn’t going to give him to the guidance counselor and say ‘I *think* this,’ He would have just shut me right out.” Respect for a student’s personal privacy and his/her right to make decisions and choices regarding his/her life is clearly evident during this exchange.

Tehmi considers how it is for them [her students] and not “her ways.” She reports making a conscious effort to refrain from imposing her ways on her students. She concludes with the observation that “ if you respect them, then they’ll return the

favor. . . .” As the discussion continues, Dlua, Ena, and Tthe continue to create a conceptual context of being in a respectful relationship with students by using terms like “being flexible,” students “feeling good,” “acceptance,” the necessity of “connection and careness,” “shared responsibilities,” “acknowledgment,” “being related,” and “decisions made as a whole” to describe their nurturing of productive student-teacher interaction. Perhaps Tehmi’s and Lani’s comments best summarize the participants’ beliefs regarding the development of student-teacher relationships, arrived at through their socialization, personal experience, and observation when they state, “I think if you respect them and then they’ll return the favor and you have to accept them for who they are . . . .” and “If they [the students] . . . respect you, then they will let you carry on, there won’t be any trouble and then you can carry on.”

Strategies used by these teachers to promote in the students the feeling of being respected include: (a) decisions for the class being made as a whole group rather than by the teacher alone; (b) sharing the responsibilities of the classroom; (c) perceiving the role of the teacher to be that of a facilitator and a leader, but as Sas articulates “not someone who has power over someone else;” and (d) the promotion of cooperation between students through situating students in groups, thereby facilitating their ability to assist each other in the process of becoming teachers as well as learners; (e) facilitating communication among the students, and (f) acceptance of students’ individual skills and knowledge.

To summarize, one of the most documented contrasts between the Euro-Canadian and Aboriginal education systems is to be found within the area of pedagogy. The use of

a teacher directed “ authoritarian / disciplinarian pedagogy prevails within most traditional mainstream Canadian schooling” (Heimbecker, 1994, p. 19) while within many Aboriginal families and communities the child’s independence has often been nurtured. It is evident from the examples above and the Aboriginal participants discussions concerning the development of student teacher relationships, issues of power and control, and classroom discipline practices in Chapter Four, that these Aboriginal teachers are operating in their classrooms from a traditional Aboriginal paradigm which emphasizes cooperation, shared responsibility, and respect for individual participants within the learning partnership.

#### Respecting the Whole Child - Meeting Needs

The damaging effects that imposed residential schooling, the religious policy of education for conversion, and the federal government policy of education for assimilation have had on the Aboriginal peoples and their communities in the Northwest Territories have been well documented ( Barnaby, Shimp, & Struthers, 1991; Abel, 1993; Hamilton, 1994; Lamothe & Cizek, 1994). Of importance to this study are the effects which the continuing social discontinuity and dislocation have on the students and participants and the examination of conscious efforts that participants make to meet the needs of the “whole child” in their classrooms.

Once again, the participants’ respect for, and unconditional acceptance of, their students is reflected in their acknowledgment of the necessity of meeting the needs of the “whole child” if learning is to take place. They approach solutions to the needs of their

students with empathy and understanding. Not once during the focus groups' discussions was blame placed upon students or their families, a marked contrast to the "complaint sessions" described by Taylor (1995) which often constitutes the non-Native teachers' response to situations and serves to increase their own feelings of cultural dislocation (p. 231) or professional inadequacy (Barnhardt, 1982, p. 144).

Ena relates this experience: "When I was teaching the grade one kids, there was one girl . . . she wouldn't have slept or anything, but she would still come. The poor thing was only in grade one. After awhile the kids noticed the pattern and they would do whatever they could to make [her] day easier . . . . They would give her their recess snack or some of them would even tell her to go sleep on the reading center cushions." Sas' experience concurs with Ena's: "We used to have times when kids would come to school and sleep, they were so tired. They'd curl up in the corner or some place with a book or a cushion and that's it. Then everyone was quiet." Both participants and the students in their classrooms recognized the need for adequate sleep as a prior condition to academic achievement.

Teachers also dealt with the need to provide a meal, or more frequent meals, for students in their classrooms or schools. Sas describes providing encouragement and inviting students home who were having a difficult day in her classroom: ". . . you could tell they were having a hard time at home, you try to understand and you try to make their life a little easier in the school. You're so happy they made it. You know it was a rough evening." Dlua responds, "Exactly." Then Sas continues: "I would say, 'Oh gee, you going home for lunch? How would you like to come home for lunch today?' and take

them home. It's always a treat for them you know." Tehmi tells the rest of her group:

"What I did one year, Alice and I, we bought cases of bread and we gave kids toast in the morning. It didn't take long to make and the ones who came early loved to make it for everybody else . . . You're giving them something to eat and there's nothing bad in it."

In contrast, Tthe relates her experience of working in a school "where the principal didn't believe that one hungry kid existed in a whole school of two hundred students" to the group and expressed her frustration at being unable to respond to the needs she witnessed.

Besides facilitating the fulfilment of basic needs of food and sleep, participants also noted the importance of being flexible in their planning of classroom lessons and activities. Community carnivals, big bingo nights, and community feasts were occasions when the teachers would consciously plan an appropriate variety of shortened learning activities for their students to minimize anticipated student behavior problems and maximize student learning. As Tehmi states: ". . . you can't just keep sending them to the office. You still have to try to teach them . . . Maybe on those days you have to plan more activities or shorter activities . . . Different ways of getting around it so that you are keeping their attention and interest, and they are still following you and not falling asleep, fighting or whatever it is they are doing."

Sharing their food, providing a quiet place to sleep, planning to accommodate community events were all perceived as being part of the role of a teacher. Gilligan (1982) referred to the Aboriginal teachers' approach as being conceptualized within the "ethic of care," a morality based on the recognition of needs, relation, and response (cited

in Nodding, 1992, p. 21). Meeting the needs of the whole child was a necessary part of ensuring academic accomplishment.

### Their Classrooms

The task of creating a learning environment within the institutionalized school setting leads to consideration of the physical set-up of the classroom, where teachers and students spend so much of their time. Participants discussed their attempts to create a micro-environment which reflected the homes and lifestyles of their students within the boundaries of their classroom walls.

Tehmi states: “ At the beginning of the year when I am setting up my classroom, I try to set it up like a home environment. Maybe a living room, things like couches or cushions or whatever, things that make it homey for the students. Things that make it comfortable.” Her emphasis on creating a home-like place and atmosphere in her classroom was reflected by the contributions of the others to the discussion. The use of long thin poles suspended from the ceiling (used in homes in the community for hanging drymeat) for displaying student work, hanging fish nets as decoration and for holding three dimensional art projects, placing hides and furs and beadwork throughout the classroom as decoration or functional objects, and always having something to eat, like bannock and tea, or at times even meat available in the classrooms were practices which the participants shared.

Another aspect of the classroom environment which participants discussed was



the need for simplicity. Sas makes this point when she relates her experience, “I think, too, when I set up my classroom, about what I wanted the kids to accomplish and not put too much out for them . . . And it’s important that the walls are not too busy. I found too much stuff made it too busy. I started out with lots of stuff thinking that it would make it colorful and appealing to them, but it was just too much. It was crazy. I just about drove myself nuts, it was my fault.” Sas’ story illustrates her conscious application of the traditional trial-and-error method of learning where “learning is monitored by direct testing of social and environmental reactions” (Stairs, 1995, p. 141) learned in her youth. Her feedback, with regard to the success or failure of her classroom environment experiment, came about as a direct result of her actions. Further, it is important to note that Sas was able to recognize the impact that “lots of stuff” on the walls had on herself, “I just about drove myself nuts,” as well as her students. Dlua concurred with Sas experience: “What I found works too is I put just a few things up. Then I leave a lot of space open, and as we do stuff, work, we just put them on the wall . . . They work that way, if you don’t make it too appealing, because [otherwise] they tend to be staring a lot and not concentrating.”

The stated preference for seating students in small groups around tables, inclusion of a “living room” within the classroom set-up, the use of functional and decorative items found in the students’ homes, and the soothing effect of uncluttered classroom walls, and the availability of snacks, bannock, and tea, or other “eats” all facilitate the creation of a familiar home style environment. Clearly, the Aboriginal teachers arrange the physical aspects of their classrooms in direct contrast to the familiar classroom scenario that

promotes individualism, with students seated in rows “staring at the back of each other’s heads and at the teacher who faces them in symbolic, authoritarian fashion” (Hesch, 1995, p. 182). The Aboriginal teachers who participated in this study consciously attempt to construct an environment which they feel facilitates the learning taking place, an environment that corresponds to that which is familiar to students and teachers— in effect, a cultural microcosm within the larger Euro-Canadian institutional setting of the school.

### Success Indicators

When asked to identify ways in which they determined if through their efforts they had attained successful classroom learning environments, the Aboriginal participants in the study responded by discussing a variety of success indicators. Lani began by describing things she didn’t see: “ I don’t think I look for things to see, but I look for things I don’t see. I don’t see anybody getting frustrated and angered because they can’t do certain things.” Sas agreed saying, “Yeah, there’s cooperation and they’re busy and they’re on task.” Ena also spoke of student behavior as an indicator of success: “ I think that the way the kids are carrying themselves physically is one obvious way of seeing that. If they’re lagging around, just dragging themselves, then you’re probably not doing a good job.” It is interesting to note that the Aboriginal teachers perceived student behavior in the classroom as an indicator of how effective their work was, not as a behavior problem belonging to the student. Other indicators of success cited by the participants included student attendance, arrival at school early, parental feedback, and

comments offered by colleagues.

Traditionally, Aboriginal people understood that, if the child was educated well, he/she would develop into an individual capable of giving back to the community thereby ensuring the future of coming generations: “When a child fails to grow with the integrity it was meant to have, elders will evaluate the parents, not the child. It is seen as the responsibility of the parent to ensure that the conditions for growth in the child are provided” ( Education Development Branch, 1993, p. xxvii). The Aboriginal teachers’ acceptance of the responsibility for providing the environmental conditions necessary for the student to learn can be construed as a modern application of the traditional parental or adult responsibility for the child’s learning. Within this traditional cultural construct, it is not unusual that the participants, working as teachers, would view student behavior in the classroom as an indicator of their own effectiveness.

### Summary

To summarize, this study provides documentation that the Aboriginal teachers who participated in the study consciously orchestrate their classroom learning environments in an effort to ensure that they reflect community values and norms. Though a series of conscious strategies—(a) by creating a physical learning environment reminiscent of the students’ homes; (b) by emphasizing shared decision making roles and responsibilities in the classroom via their shared perception of their role of “teacher” as a facilitator and learner; (c) by perceiving their students as both teachers and learners; and (d) through their emphasis on creating cooperative respectful relationships with the

community and their students— the Aboriginal teachers are indeed, “conveying the cultural whole” and teaching “within the value model of their cultures” (Morrow, 1987, p. 164). This conclusion also supports the assumption that even though the teacher training takes place in a Euro-Canadian educational institution, the students’ birth and socialization into an Aboriginal cultural setting ultimately defines their approach to teaching (Millard, 1993, p. 8). Though the generalization of this assumption as applicable in all cases is not appropriate based on this single study, Hesch’s (1995) study of Metis teacher interns also alludes to this conclusion when he states that “the interns’ teaching strategies were built upon their own life histories” (p. 205). It is also entirely possible that the necessity of maintaining the traditional ecological knowledge of the environment, due to the continued dependance on obtaining food from the land, in the northern communities (Berger, 1991) has influenced the maintenance of traditional values and socialization practices experienced by the Aboriginal teachers participating in this study. What is apparent is that, through their work in classrooms, they become “culture-brokers” (Stairs, 1995, p. 281), mediating the conflicting cross-cultural environment of the schools in which they teach in a conscious effort to sustain and promote the traditional cultural values acquired through their own enculturation process. For Aboriginal educators, teaching becomes a continuous process of seeking to find “the best balance between the divergent goals of education for economic advancement and education for cultural maintenance” (Bullivant, 1984, cited in Stairs, 1995, p. 147). As a result of their efforts, they become “cultural translators, seeking to integrate their professional teaching with the daily informal learning-teaching interactions of the

villagers” (1995, p. 147) thereby moving toward providing a culture-based learning environment for their students.

### Non-Aboriginal Teachers — Perceptions and Recommendations

Historically, research on Aboriginal education issues has ignored the insights which the experiences of Aboriginal teachers can offer all educators. This study sought to offer a corrective to that trend by asking the Aboriginal participants to discuss their attitudes, perceptions, and practices with regard to their classroom learning environments. Further, the participants were asked about recommendations which they would offer to non-Native teachers working in Territorial classrooms. The value of this contribution to the research may be further appreciated when one realizes that the majority of teachers in the Northwest Territories are non-Native. Aboriginal students in the Territories are certainly among the “ninety per cent of Native children in this country that will, at one time or another, be taught by a non-Native teacher” (Taylor, 1995, p. 224). If we are to achieve culturally-based education for Aboriginal students, the dialogue which targets cross-cultural difficulties encountered by teachers and students must be initiated from the perspective of those in the classrooms. As Barnhardt (1974) so aptly states, “the central issue is to improve the communications and increase the compatibility between what is taught in the school and what is learned in the community”( p. 9).

## Aboriginal Teachers' Perceptions

The participants began their discussion by sharing stories about events that they had witnessed or experiences that they had. It is important to note that their observations were direct and honest, proffered in the hope that by offering their perceptions of events or experiences, non-Native teachers encountering difficulties might begin to consider other alternatives to their current practices. Incidents witnessed or experienced by participants, which signaled a non-Native teacher's lack of awareness regarding the traditional cultural values of Aboriginal northerners, or the necessity of cultural negotiation, were varied. The topics which were covered were non-Native teachers classroom practices, perceived attitudes of non-Native teachers, and issues related to non-Native teachers' lack of connection to or participation in the life of the community.

The first to be mentioned was the practice of non-Native teachers importing "things from their own culture. . . like that big horn thing. . .and getting the children to colour all this stuff falling out of it and this thing, they have no idea what it is," as a Thanksgiving art activity. Dlua's comment was, "That's not our notion of Thanksgiving." The issue of a lack of culturally appropriate curriculum has been addressed in the north by the development and provision of culturally appropriate curriculum documents relevant to Inuit and Dene cultures, yet implementation, for a variety of reasons from insufficient in-service training to lack of perceived need, continues to be an issue in some locations.

Other issues which participants raised which they indicated led to miscommunication and cross-cultural conflict were: (a) seating students in rows and

discouraging them from communicating with each other; (b) missed opportunities for arranging mixed-ability grouping within the classroom which Aboriginal teachers saw as an opportunity to promote cooperation, the development of students as teachers and learners, and correct behavior; (c) their perception that non-Aboriginal people have to be talking all the time and that silence embarrassed them; (d) the perceived teacher need for classroom control, at a level regarded as absolute and impossible to attain by the Aboriginal teachers; (e) the emphasis on conformity in both behavior and student work; (f) the perception that there was a tendency exhibited by non-Native teachers to “harass and harass and harass” students into submission rather than letting them learn from their own mistakes, particularly with reference to the completion of assigned tasks; (g) a perceived lack of flexibility or willingness to change; (h) and an emphasis on criticism of students rather than praise. Yet, as Kleinfeld (1974) pointed out, the first and most important characteristic of an effective teacher of Aboriginal students was “the ability to create a climate of emotional warmth that both dissipated students’ fears in the classroom and fulfilled their expectations of highly personalized relationships” (p. 20). As Noddings (1992) so aptly states, “We do not tell our students to care; we show them how to care by creating caring relations with them” (p. 22). Throughout this study, the Aboriginal participants also emphasized the necessity of creating a classroom learning environment characterized by the quality of “careness” and respect.

Further it was the perception of the Aboriginal teachers that, all too often, minor situations escalated into major issues due to the use of discipline strategies which courted student-teacher confrontation. As Dlua commented, “I think when outsiders are coming

in, with the training they have, they [feel that they] have to control everything. That you have to get your hands on. And that's when you get into trouble."

Current research supports the Aboriginal participants' observations and indicates that it is a common view shared among Aboriginal people that non-Native teachers use "teaching methods that are culturally inappropriate" (Heimbecker, 1994, p. 252) for Aboriginal students. Ballenger (1992) contends that teacher management behavior is culturally influenced" (cited in Holyan, 1993, p. 45). The result, particularly for teenage students (Wall, 1996), is that the non-Aboriginal orientated school, or classroom, becomes a place "characterized by conflict and distrust which contributes to social adjustment and academic performance problems" (Heimbecker, 1994, p. 279). Further, Lipka (1990) states that teachers' alteration of the classroom environment from "mainstream norms such as elicitation-response-evaluation, negative sanctioning in the classroom, or "spotlighting" to norms which are more compatible with the natal culture then positive changes in students' classroom behavior can be expected" (p. 20).

When participants focused on the topic of non-Native teachers and community relations they referred to incidents which they had witnessed in their communities. First, they observed a tendency of non-Native teachers "to form little groups and then tend to stick together and to isolate themselves." Taylor (1995) describes this response to community life, a result of culture shock, as escape: "Non-Native teachers simply avoid as much contact with the local Native community as possible" (p. 230). Both Ena and Sas refer to teachers in their communities who "go to work and then go home. You never saw them other than in school." Ena continues, ". . . if the teachers, when I was growing



up, had gone out into the community, then probably they would have had a better experience. They maybe would have gotten feedback from us if they had tried to be part of the community.” Dlua concurs and adds, “. . . most northern communities have non-Native groups, they all stick together and they really do isolate themselves and then they do get into a lot of trouble.”

As Taylor (1995) points out, interaction between non-Native teacher and community is important because it “helps define how that community and its students perceive the teacher” (p.226). Unfortunately, the observed unwillingness of non-Native teachers to participate in the life of the community leads to the conclusion that they simply do not like the place: “Obvious isolation is interpreted by students as rejection of the community and, indirectly of themselves” (p. 226). Noddings (1994) articulates the importance of the students’ negative interpretation of teacher isolation when she says, “Modeling is vital. We have to show how to care in our own relations with cared-fors” (p. 22). In the words of the Aboriginal teachers participating in this study, students need to feel respected in order to “return the favor” and give respect.

It is evident from the suggestions made by the Aboriginal teachers that the primary characteristic of Aboriginal education in the North is that it is an ongoing, developmental project in every context, not a practice ready for implementation.

### Aboriginal Teachers’ Suggestions

The suggestions which the participants offered for improving non-Native teacher competence in working in Aboriginal communities focused upon the development of

constructive, caring, and respectful relationships with the community and the students.

That Noddings (1992) would concur with the Aboriginal teachers position is clear when she states, “I want to suggest that caring is the very bedrock of all successful education and that contemporary schooling can be revitalized in its light” (p. 27).

Lani pointed out that, “even a non-Native that goes in a Native community, if they get involved in the community willingly and that then they are very well respected.” Sas added this cautionary note with regard to developing community relationships, “And don’t try to take over their lives, just become part of it, you know.” Finally, Tehmi was concerned that communities become more involved and proactive about getting new teachers “into the culture” by mandating and implementing community or land-based cultural education experiences before the non-Native teachers begin working in the school. The belief that “traditional experiences ought to form the basis on which contemporary education builds” is supported in the academic literature by Grant’s (1995) findings concerning her research with the Bear Lake/Stevenson River Project in Island Lake, Manitoba ( p. 213). Yet, Taylor’s (1995) observation is that often virtually no support or direction is available for new non-Native teachers (p. 224) entering Aboriginal communities.

Participant perceptions regarding the importance of non-Native teachers’ integration into the life of the community are supported by academic research. Often, misunderstanding between teachers and students results from non-Native teachers’ inability to approach the development of their classroom environment from the natal culture. As pointed out by Kleinfeld (1974), teachers may inadvertently behave in ways

that village students perceive as rejection. Jones-Sparck (1994) notes that teachers need to have the capacity to work in cross-cultural classrooms and know how to integrate into the communities” (p. 211).

### Summary

Northern Aboriginal teachers’ perceptions of classroom learning environments can be summarized using a few words. Community connections, respectful relationships, cooperative partnerships, shared responsibilities, and “careness” provide the foundation for culturally appropriate classroom learning environments established within the context of traditional values. These are the attributes of a classroom that exemplifies “a place of learning.” The lesson beyond the world of the North is that contextualizing the classroom through “social organization, distribution of student rights, and authenticity of the teaching act” (Lipka, 1990, p. 30) enables learning both ways. As Noddings (1992) explains: “Women who speak in the different voice refuse to leave themselves, their loved ones, and connections out of their moral reasoning. They speak from and to a situation, and their reasoning is contextual” (Gilligan, 1982, cited in Noddings, 1992, p. 21). The Aboriginal teachers’ participation in this study is an example of their willingness to talk about their life and work, to share and pass on their knowledge, experiences, and stories so that “we are much stronger in what we do.” As the elders in Ena’s community said, “Our life style can’t be the way it was a few years ago, we have to move along . . . and try and find the best in both.”

## Observations — Focus Group Methodology

The use of a mini- focus group methodology for this study proved to be a beneficial means of conducting research within this particular cross-cultural context. First, data collected through focused group discussions offered a means of presenting the Aboriginal teachers' perceptions in close to the original transcript format, without the presence of an overriding researcher voice. The decision to use the conversational format chosen for the presentation of the data in Chapter Four was made in an effort to assist the reader in making contact with the primary sources— the teachers— and through them their communities. This presentation format also served to accomplish the researcher's goal of facilitating the entry of northern Aboriginal teachers' voices into the academic discourse, thereby recognizing them as experts in the process and practice of cross-cultural negotiation. Further, the discussion style of presentation, taken directly from the oral transcriptions, was done in an effort to respect the words of the Aboriginal participants, from within their traditional cultural context. This point is particularly important considering the fact that in Chapter Five isolating specific portions of dialogue from the transcripts was necessary to facilitate the researcher's interpretation of the data.

Another benefit of the focus group methodology was the opportunity which was afforded to participants to focus upon, and share their experiences, in a cooperative group situation, more in harmony with the traditional values of generosity and working together for the benefit of the group. The laughter which punctuated the discussion taking place in the focus groups and the small group format afforded all group participants a sense of working together-in-partnership to assist with the data gathering

for the research. The group format also afforded the participants an opportunity to learn through sharing each others' experiences and stories.

While the focus group methodology was found to be particularly appropriate for this study, there are particular circumstances which must be noted. First, the Aboriginal teachers involved in the study had already established personal relationships during their two-year association as northern students, living "outside", enrolled in the Indian Teacher Education Program. Thus, the focused discussions took place between participants who had prior knowledge of individual personalities, personal histories, and shared experiences.

Second, while a detailed moderator's guide was prepared for the focus group discussions (Appendix C), only the four major questions concerning socialization, teacher's classrooms, success indicators, and recommendations for non-Native teachers were used. Probes, used as noted in Chapter Four, were a means of clarification for the researcher. Thus, the discussions which took place in the focus groups were carried by the participants.

Further, while the practice of timing the discussions may appear restrictive, as Sas pointed out: "The timed discussion seemed rather strange at first, but I realized later that if we had gone on talking we would have tried to reach some sort of consensus on various issues, and that was not the point of the process." The limited time did, in fact, serve to focus the participants' discussion on the questions at hand.

Finally, the use of the focus group methodology has a prior history in northern research. The study, *Dene Teaching Methods*, conducted by Lamothe & Cizek (1994) is

one example. The researchers modified the focus group process to suit the needs of the elders and Dene teachers participating in that study (p. 5). The fact that the focus group methodology lends itself to modification, to meet specific participant needs, is another one of the strengths of this particular methodology.

### Suggestions for Further Research

As a method of conducting exploratory research, the focus groups offered an abundance of data, including additional topics beyond the scope of the study. The following are offered as suggestions for further research.

1. Conduct an investigation into the means whereby communities may be assisted with the provision of education for newly arrived non-Native teachers regarding culturally-appropriate classroom learning environments.
2. Investigate and mitigate the effects of pre-service training which may discourage newly-trained Aboriginal teachers from incorporating traditional values and practices into their classroom learning environments.
3. Prepare and implementation of an educational program which targets school administrators and addresses the negotiation of cross-cultural education issues.
4. Investigate the relationship between traditionally-defined gender roles and teacher recruitment and training in the Northwest Territories.
5. Conduct the same research study, but with male northern Aboriginal teachers, or Aboriginal teachers working at the high-school level.
6. Examine Aboriginal teachers' classroom environments to ascertain whether the

approach actually results in Aboriginal student retention and improved academic skills.

## EPILOGUE

*There is a need to root ourselves in tradition,  
not for the sake of the past  
but for the sake of the future.  
(Education Development Branch, 1993)*

As I read over this thesis again, for perhaps the one hundredth time since I began writing, I realize that what began, in isolation, as my own desperate search for a “simple thesis topic” that would facilitate the completion of my master’s degree has been transformed, through the generosity of seven Northern Canadian Aboriginal women, into a shared exploration and learning experience.

Sitting together, reaching back in time to the roots of their life histories, these seven young Aboriginal teachers shared their experiences, knowledge, and insights in an effort to articulate the importance of their traditional culture, family socialization, and community-based education experiences to their work as teachers of the children in their communities. Their depth of understanding and compassion for their students, their warm gentle humor in the face of the enormous challenges which they encounter daily in their communities and classrooms, their strength, and their willingness to share with myself and others their stories of successes and learned-lessons are the elements that made this research project a shared learning experience, giving it life and meaning.



It is through the strength, caring and effort of these women, and others like them, that schooling in the north may one day become Aboriginal education sui generis.

Marsi Choh

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INFORMATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS**

Di Ann Blesse  
#202 D2, 1121 Mc Kercher Drive  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, S7H 5B8

March, 1996

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ ;

As you may be aware, I am currently enrolled in a Master's program at the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, and I would like to invite you to participate in the research study, the completion of which is part of my degree requirements. Through teaching in cross-cultural schools and classrooms in the Northwest Territories I have become interested in exploring traditional Aboriginal socialization practices and values that influence Aboriginal teachers' perceptions, attitudes and choices with regard to the development of their classroom learning environments.

I plan to conduct mini-group focused interviews with Aboriginal teachers from the Northwest Territories to find out about their experiences and their ideas regarding the development of classroom learning environments. I would like to tape record the mini-group interviews, transcribe them, and analyze the participant responses about their ideas and experiences as Aboriginal teachers. During the mini-group sessions you will be free to participate in any part of the discussion taking place, at your discretion, and I will ask for each participant to check the transcription for accuracy once it has been prepared. The transcriptions will be participant coded to maintain individual confidentiality. The group sessions will take from 90 to 120 minutes. If there are specific themes or questions which arise out of the focused group session, I would appreciate the opportunity to contact individual participants for further clarification, either in person or by phone. Each participant interviewed will receive a copy of the interview notes for their verification. The tape recordings, notes and transcriptions will be destroyed three months after my thesis is complete. Pseudonyms will be used in order to preserve anonymity as far as possible in the thesis document and each participant will be able to choose their own pseudonym. Finally, participants may take part in any portion of the focus group discussion with which they are comfortable or withdraw from the study at any time. I hope you will be able to participate in the study and contribute your valuable knowledge and experiences as an Aboriginal teacher.

Please fill out the attached form, keeping one copy for yourself and returning one to me as soon as possible. I anticipate scheduling the mini-group interviews during the fourth week of March, 1997. I will be contacting you as to the exact time and location.

Yours truly,

Di Ann Blesse

APPENDIX B  
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM:**

**“Northern Canadian Aboriginal Teachers’ Perceptions of Classroom Learning Environments”**

Please read the following guidelines which are designed to safeguard the interests of everyone taking part in the study.

1. You will be participating in a focused mini-group discussion in which there will be a maximum of six participants.
2. Each focused mini-group discussion will be tape recorded. Participants who are uncomfortable with the recording of the sessions may choose not to participate in the study.
3. After the focus group session, you may be contacted and asked to provide additional clarification with regard to themes or questions which may arise during the transcription.
4. You will be able to check the transcriptions of your focus group session for accuracy and delete any portion of your contribution which you do not wish to have quoted in the study.
5. While the researcher can guarantee the confidentiality of the participants in the writing of the thesis or any articles which may result from the thesis, confidentiality of the focus group discussion can not be guaranteed due to the nature of the focus group format. Participants are requested that the confidentiality be maintained with regard to the focus group discussion.
6. The tape recordings, transcriptions made during the study will be destroyed when the study is finished.
7. Teacher’s names and locations will not be used in the thesis or in any articles or presentations based on this study unless you expressly relinquish your personal anonymity, by signing a release form, after you have reviewed the transcripts and interview notes.
8. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time. If this happens your contribution to the taped focus group interviews will not be used.
9. Any questions which you have about the study can be directed to either:

Di Ann Blesse, Graduate Student  
Educational Foundations  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
(306) 966-7609

Dr. Marie Battiste, Associate Professor  
Educational Foundations  
College of Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
(306) 966-7576



## Participant Consent

(Participant's copy)

I \_\_\_\_\_, have read and understand the  
(Please print your name)

guidelines above. With these conditions, I hereby agree to participate in Di Ann Blesse's study, "**Northern Canadian Aboriginal Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Learning Environments**".

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

=====

## Participant Consent

(Researcher's copy)

I \_\_\_\_\_, have read and understand the  
(Please print your name)

guidelines above. With these conditions, I hereby agree to participate in Di Ann Blesse's study, "**Northern Canadian Aboriginal Teacher's Perceptions of Classroom Learning Environments**".

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Home mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Summer mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

(If different from Home address)

\_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX C**  
**FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR'S**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

## **MODERATOR 'S INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

\* Please note: The moderator's interview questions and discussion prompts are prepared to provide assistance in focusing the discussion of the group. Under each heading questions are listed which serve the purpose of discussion prompts and/or topics which moderator can check off on the form as they are addressed by the group. While all the prompts may or may not be used as such, the questions are designed to narrow the focus of the group's discussion from the general to the specific. Summary and final questions are included to provide closure to the focused discussion.

### **INTRODUCTION**

We are here today to discuss classroom learning environments. Of particular interest are the traditional socialization practices and values that influence your perceptions and attitudes, and the choices which you make when developing a learning environment in your classroom.

Before we begin our discussion, I would like to provide you with some information on the process which we will use. First, this focus group session will be tape recorded so that I can refer back to the discussion when I write my thesis. My role as moderator will be to ask questions which will focus the discussion taking place, but the manner in which the group the questions is up to the participants. The assistant moderator will be taking notes which record who is speaking and the main points of the discussion as we move along. Please say exactly what you think in the manner that suits you. Everyone here has valid insights and experiences which will add to the research. We're here to share our stories, learn from each other, and have fun while we do it. Finally, please keep in mind the responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of the focus group discussion which takes place here today. Let's begin with some introductory comments about ourselves. Starting to my left, let's start going around the table and giving our names and a little about our teaching experience.

### **Setting the Scene**

For all of us, there are at least three educational environments The first is "the formal in-school educational environment. That is the one in the classroom with the teacher - the one we are all familiar with and think of as 'education'" (Rhodes, 1988, p. 25). The second is the formal, "out-of-school educational environment" (1988, p. 25) which includes young children listening to elders' stories, participating in church services, learning to sew from patterns, or taking part in a community volunteer fire-fighter training workshop. The third educational environment is "the informal out-of-school one" (1988, p. 25), learning to talk, learning from observation of the environment, or small boys trying to fish or snare rabbits. For purposes of this study, the educational environment which we will be discussing today is the formal in-school educational environment.

### **General Questions**

1. Each culture has its means by which it assists children to become responsible, contributing members of the group. How has this process been achieved with children in your various family experiences?

#### **Possible Probes**

- a) How was a child's unacceptable behavior dealt with in the family setting? The community?
- b) What types of decisions were children allowed to make for themselves? At what ages?
- c) What responsibilities can you remember having as a young child? As you got older?
- d) Was there a difference in the way male and female children were raised? Different

expectations?

- e) With respect to children, what were the responsibilities and roles and relationships between generations in your family, the extended family members, or the community?
- f) Were there particular individuals in your family who fulfilled special roles during your childhood? In the community?

2. Reflecting upon your classrooms, how do you apply experiences which you had growing up in your family and the community to your the development of classroom learning environments?

Possible Probes

- a) Are there rules for your classroom which reflect your socialization experiences?  
How are they established?
- b) What classroom seating arrangements do you prefer? Are there reasons for this preference?
- c) Are there classroom routines which you prefer? Are there reasons which support particular routines?

3. Reflecting upon your last teaching assignment, what indicators let you know that you have been successful in the creation of your classroom environment?

Possible Probes

- a) Observable student behavior?
- b) Observable levels of classroom activity?
- c) Observable student-teacher or student-student relationships?

4. What factors do you consciously consider as you are in the process of the development of a classroom environment?

Possible Probes

- a) Ways of working with students?
- b) Arrangement of physical environment?
- c) Transition practices?

5. Are there aspects of your classroom learning environments and an accompanying value-based rationale that you feel would be important to include in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers' training?

**Ending Question**

1. As we end the focused discussion, are there particular points which have been brought up which you feel are most critical for creating positive classroom learning environments for Aboriginal students?

**Summary Questions**

\* These questions are asked after the assistant moderator has given an oral summary of the key themes and ideas generated in the focused discussion.

1. Is this an adequate summary of what we have discussed here today?

2. Is there anything more which you would like to add?

**Final Question**

\* This question is asked after the moderator provides a brief overview of the purpose and possible benefits of the study.

1. Have we missed anything in our discussion which you would like to add?

APPENDIX D  
REQUEST TO WAIVE ANONYMITY

## REQUEST TO WAIVE ANONYMITY

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have participated in the study entitled: Northern Canadian Aboriginal Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Learning Environments. conducted by Di Ann Blesse. I have reviewed the transcript of my contribution to the focus group discussion and personal interview notes. I wish to claim a voice in the study and am therefore requesting the use of my real name in the final thesis document.

I HEREBY REQUEST THAT MY RIGHT TO ANONYMITY BE WAIVED AND THAT MY REAL NAME BE USED IN Northern Canadian Aboriginal Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Learning Environments.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_